



## *Mashams in Cumbria*

### **Chris Gibson and Matthew Berry back Charollais as their top terminal sire - Carroll Barber reports.**

Low Audlands farm in the Lake District Low Fells, near Kendal in Cumbria officially has ‘undisturbed wind’ all the way 30 miles from the coast and then from across the Irish Sea. As you can imagine it is therefore extremely exposed to harsh weather conditions and runs from 700’ - 1,000’. The 1,100 acre holding is farmed by a family partnership; Chris Gibson and his wife Anna together with Chris’s step-son Matthew Berry and his wife Louise and their two young children, 4 year old Jake and 1 year old Katy.

One ewe breed has dominated the farming at Low Audland for many years, the Masham. This hardy sheep renowned for its longevity and good mothering ability has stood the test of time. The

majority of the Masham ewes on the farm are home-bred, being the progeny of the farm’s Dalesbred ewes and Teeswater rams.

“We have a total of 810 Masham ewes, 400 Dalesbred ewes, 20 Teeswaters and 175 Masham hogs. We like the Masham, she produces just what we need on this farm; few multiple births, a good carcase and able to thrive on the land, with minimal shepherding requirements.”

In addition to the sheep flock the farm has 200 dairy cows and 180 followers. “We took the decision a couple of years ago to up the number of cows and then house them, which has released more land for the sheep flocks. So their numbers have gone up as well.”

In line with the farm’s policy to cut back on shepherding all the sheep are lambed outside from the end of March onwards. They can find some shelter from the stone walls but little else to protect them from the strong winds. Ten years ago the farm started using Charollais tups and continue to tup all the Mashams with the breed, including the hogs. The family find them easily lambed with their small heads and get up and go.

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“We buy our rams usually at the Bentham Rampage sale, which is first in the season. We would prefer to purchase rams with performance data, but if these are not available we go for the best shaped, growthy rams with width and a good bit of cover.”



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Chris sells all the lambs deadweight to 2 Sisters, they select all the lambs on farm and take them to a collection centre a few miles away. Their ability to hit the target specification for 2 Sisters is to be admired. “They want a 20 kgs carcase at R2 or R3L and we find that the Charollais on the Masham does this consistently, with no risk of going overfat or not reaching the weight.”

Quite rightly the farm is proud of the results achieved; to date they have sold 627 lambs graded R, 386 grade U and 47 graded E. “To get E grade lambs out of a cross-bred ewe is tremendous and nothing going overfat, which is when the penalties really kick in, anything graded 4 will lose you 35p/kg.”

The flock starts lambing at the end of March and by the 1st August the first lambs are ready to go. Everything is reared outside on grass up until the end of November when a small amount of concentrate feed is given. During December and January the abattoir offer an extra 10p/kg for “Northern Lambs” and Chris takes advantage of this bonus and sends the majority of lambs during this period. They get paid on weights up to 21 kgs and a typical batch of 102 lambs that went in December averaged 19.9 kgs and £84 in money.

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***Masham ewe with her Charollais cross lambs at Low Audlands Farm, Cumbria***

Chris is the first to admit that this cross does not produce the smartest looking lambs with the long coat of the Masham. “The collection centre are just amazed when they see the results come back, the killing-out % and grades achieved are just spot on, for the market.”

“Sheep farmers have to accept what the consumer desires and produce it in a profitable way; worrying about flashy looks especially in the ewe breeds is just not relevant to making a profit from lambs.”

Chris is sure that more emphasis needs to be put on easier rearing and carcase qualities in the future. “We love our sheep but they need to look after themselves; you cannot afford to spend too much time shepherding.

My other step-son Adam has twice represented England in the World Championships and has spent a lot of time in New Zealand. My daughter Ellen is the secretary for the



Dalesbred Sheep Breeders Association.”

The windy conditions are not all bad news for the farm. Some 19 years ago the long process of obtaining planning permission to put up wind turbines on the farm began. The metering that recorded the wind for three years confirmed that it was indeed an excellent site and today there are four turbines continually turning in the wind. One of the conditions of the planning permission was that 230 acres of land had to be farmed under a habitat management plan, similar to HLS. There are limitations on stocking rates and breeds that can be run on this land, so much so that in the summer it gets overgrown. “They are looking to re-establish heather on the land.”

The family have invested heavily on the farm in recent years. Chris explains “When you have someone to follow on from you who is so interested and dedicated to farming, then you want to ensure they have a good future. Matthew has an ambition to lamb 3,000 ewes and if we can find the land, there is no reason why he should not achieve it.”



***Masham ewe with her Charollais cross lambs at Low Audlands Farm, Cumbria***

***Charollais cross Masham lambs all born outside at Low Audlands Farm, Cumbria.***

