

CHAROLLAIS

THE FARMER'S FUTURE



CHAROLLAIS
SHEEP
SOCIETY

FUTURE PROOF YOUR FLOCK

at the following sales in 2023:

1st July

Premier Sale, Worcester

31st July

Dungannon

7th August

NSA Builth

12th August

Bentham Ram-Page

16th August

NSA Exeter

25th August

Carlisle

25th August

NSA Rugby Ram Sale

1st September

NSA South East Thame

8th September

Kelso Ram Sales

15th September

NSA Melton Mowbray

18th September

Ballymena

18th September

NSA Builth Main Sale

21st September

Shrewsbury

28th September

Welshpool

A BREED FOR ALL SYSTEMS

Welcome to this first edition of Charollais – The Farmer's Future which showcases commercial farmers across the UK, who favour Charollais in their sheep enterprises.

Some resounding themes are repeated from these farms; they voice the many vital traits that Charollais add to their enterprises.

No one in farming is immune from the rocketing input costs affecting agriculture and the need to alter production systems to ensure a profitable bottom line.

The farms featured have done just that; reducing expensive bought in feed and shifting the reliance to forage crops.

Charollais lambs thrive on these systems, with ease of lambing, fast growth and quick finishing. And at the end they produce a quality carcass at a premium weight, conformation and finish. If we are to ensure consumers continue to purchase lamb, then we must supply meat they will enjoy and return to time and time again for their meals.

The Charollais is undoubtedly a farmers' ram, bred with functionality as a priority. Fit, functional rams are essential for the future of profitable sheep production across the UK in all types of farming systems.

As farming support payments shift across the devolved nations of the UK, the importance of efficient, lower input sheep systems capable of producing a premium product has never been higher.

Putting Charollais at the heart of your farming system is the first step to a sustainable, profitable future.

Best wishes,

Carroll Barber
and the Charollais Sheep Society



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Charollais Sheep Society

Youngmans Road,
Wymondham,
NR18 0RR

Tel: 01953 603335

Society secretary: Carroll Barber

Society chairman: Charles Sercombe

Registered charity: 282757

Photography contributors:

Country Girl Media
Isla Campbell
Robert Smith
Tim Scrivener

*Publication designed by
Country Girl Media*

www.charollaisheep.com

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Fast finishing off herbal leys and lucerne for Charollais cross lambs

Easy lambing, fast finished lambs off grass and herbal leys are the priority for Marlborough, Wiltshire-based farm manager Neil Ridgway and shepherd Paul Barnes.

Farming a total of 3000 acres, 2000 of which is owned, and with a dairy herd which is currently expanding to 700 cows alongside an extensive arable operation, Stowell Farms currently runs a 1400-ewe flock of North Country Mules.

The aim for the farm is to be as self-sufficient and sustainable as possible, aiming to make best use of grazed grass and alternative forages, explains Neil.

"It is important that the sheep are a complimentary enterprise to the rest of the farming system, rather than just an add on to make use of marginal land.

"There are more than 700 acres of chalk downland on the farm, but that's not the only ground

the sheep have access to. We're using them within the arable rotation to add some fertility and organic matter to the land and it is important to recognise these benefits alongside the financial return they offer."

Neil says the role of every enterprise on the farm overlaps, providing symbiosis in the system. "We have an anaerobic digester which is fed with a variety of crops from the farm, with this in turn producing digestate which fertilises the ground.

"The arable, dairy and sheep enterprises all benefit from this, with the sheep then grazing stubble turnips within the arable rotation to boost soil fertility further," he explains.



* Neil Ridgway, Stowell Farms.

When it comes to flock management the aim is to finish all lambs on the farm. Historically this has meant using creep feed, but as the farming system adapts the intention is to reduce reliance on feed.



PHOTOGRAPHY : COUNTRY GIRL MEDIA

"The whole farm is in a mid-tier countryside stewardship scheme and we've planted 150 acres of herbal leys. Unfortunately, last year's dry summer meant they didn't get the best start, but they've come through the winter well," he adds.

The aim is to use these herbal leys as well as 150 acres of lucerne leys to finish lambs once silage cuts have been taken from them.

By lambing in April the target is to get the first lambs away in July, with lambs needing to be 40kg or heavier to be drawn for sale, says Neil. "With a scanning percentage of 193%, we're looking to sell 92% deadweight.

"We tend to draw lambs once a fortnight once we start picking them and the performance of the Charollais cross lambs off both the herbal leys and lucerne is superb. The lambs really thrive on that high quality forage and it is helping make the farm more sustainable by reducing the need for concentrate feed."

That's just one of the benefits the Charollais are bringing, with ease of lambing another key consideration.

"We lamb both inside and outside, with triplets and singles lambing inside to help with cross-fostering, while most of the twins are lambed outside. A few of the shearlings carrying twins also lamb inside if we feel they need keeping an eye on," he adds. Ewes are fed a homegrown, high quality hay and an 18% concentrate appropriate to lambs carried.

"Knowing we're using easier lambing tups helps ensure we're not having to interfere too much at lambing. The less we have to intervene the better all round for both ewes and lambs."

A lack of local liveweight markets means all lambs are sold on a deadweight basis to ABP at Yetminster. "Deadweight suits our system as we know the price in advance and get immediate feedback in terms of grading on how the lambs have performed.

"Seeing the grading sheets every time we send a load of lambs helps inform our management and lamb selection too. We're aiming for a 3L fat class on the lambs, with most lambs grading U or better."



Charollais proves a hit as a maternal cross at Rowanston

Having built the commercial flock at Rowanston, Maybole, Ayrshire, to a peak of 2500 ewes in 2020, brothers John and James Andrew have used Charollais rams throughout the course of the growth of this flock.

“We used our first Charollais in 1984 when we were running just 150 Scotch Mules alongside a small dairy herd and 100 fattening cattle and the sheep enterprise has grown considerably from there,” comments John.

Having stopped dairying in 1996, the family took on the hill farm of Blair which carried 650 Scotch Blackface ewes. After breeding enough pure sheep for hill replacements, they crossed 200 of the Blackface ewes to the Charollais tup. “We believe there is no better breed to put on a Blackie ewe to produce a quality prime lamb. The Charollais x Blackie ewe lambs have also become the mainstay of our lowland flock,” he adds.

“Some may question the use of a Charollais as a maternal breed, but we have found the Charollais cross Blackie to be a tremendous ewe, being much easier kept than the big hungry Mules and producing an outstanding carcass lamb when put back to a



* The Andrew family also run a small pedigree flock of Charollais, numbering 30 breeding females.



* John (right) and David Andrew of Rowanston, Maybole, Ayrshire.

Charollais or a Texel.”

Having split the business in 2020, John now farms 1770 acres in partnership with his wife Allison who is a full time social worker and son David under the original business name of R and J Andrew. “When David is not attending to the farm he plays rugby for Scottish premiership champions Marr, while our eldest son Euan is an electrical engineer and daughter Eilidh is studying psychology at university,” adds John.

Current stocking is 1000 ewes of which 550 are hill and 450 low ground, which includes 30 pedigree Charollais and 10 Blue Texels. The flock is completely self-contained apart from Hill Cheviot and Charollais stock tups bought in. “All cattle and lambs are finished on farm and we always aim at producing the best quality prime lambs we can,” says David.

“With this in mind, we are currently changing the hill ewes from the Blackie to Hill North Country Cheviots. The only reason we haven’t done this sooner is the Charollais cross Blackie females were doing such a good job for us. However, with the pure Cheviot wether lamb worth so much more than the pure Blackie, the decision to change has been made.

“In order to standardise the breeding flock to all white faced ewes, we are now using Logie tups on the crossing Cheviots to produce our low ground replacements. These Logie cross ewes are then put to Charollais tups as a terminal sire and the resultant lambs are weighing and grading incredibly well,” he adds.

All Charollais tups used on the commercial flock are homebred from the Rowanston pedigree flock. “We sell a

few naturally done shearing tups privately to repeat customers each year and have recently sold a few tup lambs at the breed sale at Worcester.

We are not opposed to performance recording, but having seen too many poor sheep with high indexes in all breeds, we still remain unconvinced. Having an overall index can be misleading as different types of tups are needed for different ewe breeds and systems so individual trait EBVs should be much more important. Hopefully with the advancement of CT scanning, performance recording will become more accurate,” comments David.

The management ethos has always been to have moderate sized commercial ewes producing fast growing carcass lambs when put to quality Charollais sires. “Using different tups on the commercial flock and seeing how their progeny perform on the hook is probably the best recording you can get,” he adds.

Apart from a few early season live sales, all lambs are sold deadweight through Ayrshire Country Lamb group (Farmstock) and usually go to Woodheads



* Using a Charollais on a Black ewe has bucked the trend for Charollais as a maternal breed and produced a tremendous crossing ewe for Rowanston.



* Logie tups are now used on the crossing Cheviot ewes producing quality finished lambs.

at Turriff or Vivers Scotlamb at Annan. In 2021, which was also the first year of trading as the new business, the family won the trophy for the best quality lambs produced over a whole season with 1036 lambs averaging 20.1 kg DW and 93% hitting the top two carcass bands.

“This was particularly pleasing as this was almost our entire lamb crop and not just a few select batches,” adds David.

Lambing wise, 120 four and five crop ewes are lambed indoors in February and early March with these lambs creep fed at grass to hit the early market in May. The five crop ewes are culled when their lambs are sold.

“Some 300 younger age ewes are lambed outside from 1st

April, again all to Charollais tups where the easy lamb and get up and go characteristics of the Charollais lamb is important to our relatively low labour system. As many of these lambs as possible are finished off grass from beginning of July with the remainder weaned alongside the hill wethers and finished in the new year on maincrop swedes. Home grown whole oats are fed in hoppers to the last batches.”

A further 80 ewe lambs are run with the tup for 17 days to lamb from 18th April. “These are the only sheep we no longer use the Charollais as terminal sire on. Because these ewe lambs are young and still growing we feel a slower growing lamb doesn’t pull their condition down as much, so have opted for Beltex and Blue Texel tups,” highlights David.

The April lambers and ewe lambs are wintered on fodder beet from early January to a fortnight pre-lambing and receive no concentrates. The February and March lambers and the pedigrees are fed a homemix of oats, soya, molasses and minerals.

Meanwhile, hill ewes all lamb outside from 18th April and this year have had one tonne of Crystalyx tubs in total to the whole flock. Hill stock ewe lambs are wintered away from home on dairy grass.

Charollais tick the box for direct marketing in Leicestershire

Charollais cross lambs are set to play a key role in helping one Leicestershire estate expand its direct marketing initiative.



* Nick Smith, livestock manager of Belvoir Castle.

Coming from Belvoir Castle Estate's 1300 North of England Mule flock, most lambs are currently marketed on a deadweight basis to a mainstream abattoir. However, that is set to change as livestock manager Nick Smith looks to capitalise on the Estate's other enterprises and brand to maximise returns from the flock.

"The Estate has a large farm shop plus a high-end brasserie which opened in June

2021, these outlets plus the extensive shooting enterprise and other events will in future be the outlet for most of the lamb off the estate.

"The remainder will be sold under the Belvoir Castle label through local butchers to pubs and restaurants in the region. The quality of the Charollais cross lambs is an important aspect of the production, as the product must be high end for the selective outlets.

"Hereford and Shorthorn beef from the Estate is already marketed through these outlets. The eating quality of Charollais lamb will be an important aspect of this direct marketing strategy," he explains.

Set in the heart of England, the flock lambs outside from mid-April onwards, with this being another key reason for the choice of Charollais as the main terminal sire. "Ease of lambing

is essential for this system. We use teasers to help tighten the lambing period, with 90% of the flock lambing in the first three weeks.

"With just myself and one assistant responsible for lambing, there isn't much time to be dealing with difficult lambings. We need lambs which are easily born and get up and suck quickly," says Nick.

Integrated within the Estate's other activities, the flock is run on a low-input system, with no bought in concentrates fed. "Ewes graze a mix of permanent pasture, rougher ground and grass leys and forage crops in the arable rotation.

"It is very much a case of the sheep fitting in around other enterprises, with much of the permanent pasture around the Castle itself unavailable during the summer months due to events taking place," he adds.



PHOTOGRAPHY : TIM SCRIVENER

With a tight lambing period a key target the Estate run rams at a 1:40 ratio. "We also only want a moderate lambing percentage. The target is to be scanning at 180%. Going much higher than that means we have an excessive number of triplets which doesn't work in our lower input system."

Nick explains that investments in both abortion vaccines and mineral and trace element testing have paid dividends in reducing the number of empty ewes and boosting ewe and lamb performance. "We've got barren rates down to about 2% now which is where we want to be and supplementing with both copper and selenium is helping maintain ewe body condition and push lamb performance," he adds.

And when it comes to ram selection Nick is keen to stick to a more traditional type of Charollais. "I'm looking for rams with good conformation, easy fleshing, fine bone and good skins. These type of rams suit both the flock and the system and ensure we can finish lambs at good weights without the need to buy concentrates for either ewes or lambs."

From April to October the flock grazes forage crops

within the arable rotation, ensuring ewes and lambs have the best grazing at the key time. "Winter grazing is a mix of cover crops and permanent pasture around the Castle, but as that ground has been free of sheep over the summer it works quite well to graze it as clean ground in the run up to and during tugging," he adds.

Marketing the Estate's lamb more directly is something Nick believes presents an exciting opportunity for the flock. "We've seen how well it is working with the suckler herd and I believe it presents a great opportunity to expand the Estate brand and develop

a sustainable future for sheep within the farming enterprise.

"We're currently selling about 500 lambs a year as store lambs to ease grazing pressure as we run up to tugging. If we can get to the stage where we're finishing every lamb and selling them direct then that will boost both income for the Estate and job satisfaction for me.

"Of the lambs that we currently sell on a deadweight basis the Charollais crosses are consistently outperforming those by other breeds in terms of conformation grades, so I'm confident it is the breed to use as we switch to increased direct marketing," Nick believes.



Charollais top of the game for lamb vigour and ease of lambing

Father and son team, Robert and Scott Cromie are testament to the fact that “if it isn’t broke, don’t try and fix it”, a statement that rings true with the fact that the Charollais breed has featured as the terminal sire of choice for some 30 years.



* Scott and Robert Cromie.

Farming just outside of Banbridge in Northern Ireland, Scott came home to farm after finishing his three years at Agricultural College. His year out at Greenmount on an

extensive sheep farm provided him with a broader knowledge of the sheep industry and since coming home he has grown the size of their own flock.

The farm now comprises of 500 ewes which he runs with Charollais, Charollais x Texel, Texel and Suffolk rams. He uses teaser rams which he runs with ewes some 17 days before he puts his rams in and this has proved successful.

A batch of ewes are lambed early each year indoors in January and put out to grass as soon as possible, no longer than two weeks depending on the weather, availability of grass and how much shed space is available. “Charollais sired lambs grow well and have no problem reaching target weights for the Easter market,” explains Stuart.



“All lambings are scored for difficulty, strength of lambs, prolificacy and milk yield of the mother. Lambs are then weighed regularly for growth and the top performing females are chosen for replacements. They rear all their own replacements rather than buying in as he feels this reduces disease risk. “This year we scanned at 190%, but the number of lambs which are sold to the processor are a true indicator of a successful lambing,” he adds. All ewe lambs are put to Charollais ram due to the easy lambing attributes of the breed.

Early lambs are fed 16% protein pellet, but the late lambers

have a grass only diet. “We reseed on a regular basis as lambs will always finish better on a fresh sward. We’re also big believers in rotating the grazing ground so that sheep always have fresh grass,” he adds.

Robert and Scott source their rams from local markets looking for Charollais rams with a good shoulder, a level top line, well-muscled hindquarters and correct in its mouth. They must also be good on their feet as good mobility is essential for tugging. “I prefer to handle a ram before purchase as sometimes wool can hide a multitude of sins.”

All lambs are sent to ABP where Robert and Stuart are regularly paid bonuses on grades, sometimes up to 20p/kg for E grade lambs and 10p/kg on U grade lambs. Stuart finds the Charollais grade well and have a high killing out percentage of up to 48-50%. He favours the Charollais ram as it produces a good quality lamb when crossed with his Texel cross and Suffolk cross ewes with the added advantage of generally an easier birth.

“Another benefit we see with the breed is with so many ewes lambing at once, the Charollais’ ability to be up and sucking almost right away saves a lot of time trying to put lambs on ewes to suckle,” he comments.



PHOTOGRAPHY : AGRI IMAGES, MAUREEN COWAN AND SCOTT CROMIE



There's no beating a Charollais for meat quality

Evenness of fleshing, high percentages of lean meat and good levels of intramuscular fat make Charollais cross lamb the perfect choice for retail butcher, Stephen Maskill of Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire.

"We sell 12-14 lambs a fortnight to a discerning customer base who expect a quality product week in, week out", he explains.

"The moderate fat cover and good content of intramuscular fat carried by Charollais cross carcasses is perfect for our shop as we aim to hang lamb carcasses for a week before we cut them. This enhances the quality of the meat and ensures we deliver tender, tasty lamb for our customers.

"Other Continental terminal sires aren't as well suited to hanging due to the bluer type of carcass they produce that lacks fat cover in key areas."

When it comes to carcass conformation Stephen says Charollais crosses excel over other breeds for the balance of fleshing throughout the lamb.



* Stephen Maskill (right) believes Charollais is well suited to hanging as they have cover in key areas

"From the shoulder through to the leg, the Charollais cross lamb is well balanced and evenly fleshed. The shoulder is well fleshed without having too much fat in it and is well suited a range of uses.

"You can bone and roll it, either whole or halved. Or it can be used to make a Lamb Henry or diced for use in a variety of dishes to suit the wider ethnic cuisines now popular in the UK," he adds.

When it comes to the loin, he says Charollais lambs can yield as much as 6-10 more

chops than other breeds. "That's valuable additional income from a carcass and the width and depth of fleshing throughout the loin means each and every chop is as good as the next."

Stephen says the legs are equally as versatile as the other main parts of a Charollais cross carcass. "Because the conformation of the Charollais cross isn't too extreme, the legs are perfect for our customers. We can either sell them whole or halved, or during the summer cut leg steaks for barbeques.

"We generally like a 21-22kg carcass as that weight produces joints of the size which suits our customers. However, during the winter months we will go for a slightly heavier carcass, sometimes up to 26kg to produce heavier joints and more diced lamb."

And, as a farmer as well as a butcher Stephen advocates the Charollais breed from that perspective too. "Charollais cross lambs are great farming lambs. They're easily finished, not needing any supplementary feed unless we're finishing them late in the year when the grass is going away and isn't the quality it is earlier in the summer and autumn.

"At birth the Charollais cross lambs are vigorous and eager to get up and suck. They thrive on their mother's milk and grow quickly. We also find the rams to be exceptionally fertile and eager to work.

"With Charollais crosses we'll generally have finished all the homebred lambs at 25 weeks and have to go and buy store lambs to keep up a ready supply for the shop. Again, we favour Charollais cross store lambs as we know they'll suit our needs.

"The only issue is finding these later in the season as they've all usually been slaughtered earlier in the year!" he adds.

"We pride ourselves on selling high quality, locally sourced meat and Charollais cross lambs have been central to the success of the butcher's shop over the last 40 years," adds Stephen.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERT SMITH

Maximising live weight potential with Charollais at Gelli Farm

A desire to produce a high quality Continental cross lamb, finished off grass only on a farm that has ground running up to 1850 feet above sea level, has meant that Dai Howells has opted for the Charollais as one of their prominent terminal sires of choice.

“We’ve used Charollais for more than 10 years now, even trialled them on our hill ewes with great success,” comments Dai, who farms alongside his father Richard and mother Susan and brother Lyn at Gelli Farms, Port Talbot, Mid Glamorgan.

The farm covers 1850 acres including both owned and rented ground and two parts of rented ground at The Gower and in Cowbridge.

Stock wise, the family run 1600 ewes alongside 400 replacement females a year

with the ewe base being predominantly South Welsh Mountain ewes which are put to pure tups or Texel rams with the Texel cross progeny numbering 250 ewes which are put to Charollais rams. These females are sponged and then mated before going away on rented ground before returning for lambing inside on the 8th March.

“They’re not housed for long, just as a precaution as we’re using a terminal sire on a Continental cross ewe and providing weather isn’t

torrential wind and rain, the ewes and lambs are out to grass as soon as possible,” adds Dai.

“We find this to be a fantastic cross with lambs weighing at around the 40kg mark at point of sale. We’ve always been impressed with the Charollais cross lambs, the tight skins on them really show them up to be the solid handling lambs they are,” he adds.

Ewes are on the Heptavac P programme and everything on the farm is given Footvax. “We’ve also vaccinated for



* Dai and Richard Howells of Gelli Farm.

enzootic abortion because, while we haven’t had a problem ourselves in the flock, surrounding farms have, so we have opted for it as a preventative measure,” says Dai.

Charollais tups are sourced privately from two Welsh flocks, the Glyn Coch flock of Adrian Davies and the Arbryn flock of Arwyn Thomas. “I prefer a tup a touch stronger of bone and carrying a little light hair in the face as that often means the progeny are hardier and better suited for the hill,” adds Dai. “Both breeders choose the rams for me and so far, we’ve always been impressed with what we’ve had,” he adds.

Lambs are sold off grass liveweight through a collection centre in Neath with the majority of them heading for Dunbia and St Merryn Meats. “Historically we were drawing lambs in June, but have moved

that closer to July as the ewes are ready to be weaned and tend to have less problems with udders post weaning that bit later on,” adds Richard.

“We’d be tempted to run a Charollais across the Welsh Mountain ewes, but we’re liking that Texel cross progeny for the Charollais to then run on and we would end up with too many types in the flock,” adds Richard.

“The rams always hold themselves well, often surprisingly looking better at harder times of the year than the Welsh Mountain tups do,” adds Dai.

Alongside the sheep enterprise, the family run 35 Limousin cows, most of which are pedigree, but a few cross cows have produced crossbred show calves in the past with great success.



A TUP FOR ALL EWES



NO COMPROMISE, JUST MAXIMISE!

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