

THEME REPORT



SHETLAND MONITOR FARM Adding Value to Shetland Hill Lambs

The native Shetland breed is the foundation of the Shetland sheep industry with the pure breeds populating the marginal hill ground and with crosses produced from the Shetland ewes on inbye land that can efficiently utilise the available improved pasture. Over the years many other hill breeds have been tried but none were able to cope and thrive in the Shetland hill environment. To ensure the survival of the Shetland sheep industry we need to find a way to ensure that the native hill sheep are financially viable.

THE CHALLENGE

The small size of Shetland hill lambs off the hill has always made them difficult to market. Until 2015 there was a steady store lamb trade that meant most hill lambs could find a market. In 2016 the market dropped to such an extent that it was difficult to give away the smallest hill lambs and if shipped south from Shetland their sale value would struggle to recoup the costs incurred.

The market has remained flat since 2016 and in the last 3 years there has been deterioration in the European market for light lambs from Shetland and the UK resulting in a lack of demand for the pure Shetland hill lambs in both the finished and store markets. This undermines the confidence of producers and their belief in a future for the native hill breed, making them less willing to invest in and develop the breed. Without an improvement in the market for Shetland hill lamb there is a danger that the numbers of pure Shetland Sheep in Shetland will decline further.

While pasture fed hill lambs are greatly appreciated by locals and by the limited number of visitors and chefs etc. who have the opportunity to experience the product there is a need to market the product more widely. These days consumers are frequently looking for high quality, locally sourced, traceable food with a strong provenance and Shetland can make use of the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status for Shetland lamb to satisfy this demand.



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WHAT WE DID ON FARM

The Shetland Monitor Farm at Bigton does not have any pure-bred Shetland sheep working only with Shetland cross ewes to terminal sires. However, it was felt that a number of the Community Group did have pure Shetland sheep with a significant proportion running sheep on hills and common grazing's.

It was therefore felt that the MF project should do something to discuss and address this problem and as a result the Shetland Hill Lamb Group was set up among interested members of the monitor farm community group with Eric Graham as Chairperson.

THE RESULTS

The group discussed the various marketing options and the systems that could be used to finish Shetland hill lambs. The members of the Shetland Hill Lamb Group are keen to promote the benefits of collaboration among producers of Shetland hill lamb and to coordinate the marketing of these fantastic small lambs

Demand for Shetland Lamb

There are basically 3 times of year when Shetland lamb is in demand.

Mid -August to early September	Reasonable demand but falls off by Mid -September.
Christmas Market	This is mainly for lambs going elsewhere in the EU and is looking for lambs around 2-3 weeks before Christmas. This has recently been via Lockerbie who take commission but also take on much of the risk associated with exporting lambs
Spring Market	End of March into April up until Easter

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In discussion it was felt that the easiest market to target with Shetland hill lambs was the Christmas market. It potentially could allow producers to utilise sheep sheds before the ewe flocks are housed. At that time of year, the market is looking for smaller carcasses that can be exported to Spain, Portugal and Italy.

In these countries there is a tradition of spit roasting smaller lambs for celebrations. Although demand has fallen slightly in recent years, consumers in these countries still look for this type of lamb for special occasions and are willing to pay a premium for them. The lambs for this export trade need to be shipped to the mainland for processing 2-3 weeks before Christmas.

Finishing lambs in Shetland for shipping to south markets relies on collaboration and the same collaboration could potentially be used to purchase suitable concentrate feeding at good rates.

There will be a need to batch lambs for shipment which will probably require somebody in each area of Shetland to advise producers and help grade lambs.

It would appear possible to lift the value of the type of lamb that could only achieve less than £5 as a store in Sept/Oct to leave around a £10-15.00 profit after all costs.

Finishing Systems

Consideration needs to be given to the potentially lower cost of finishing lambs on a variety of forage crops including

- Forage Rape
- Swedes
- Plantain
- New grass aftermath
- Stubble turnips

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	Growth Potential Per Lamb g/day	Days to Grazing from Sowing	No of lambs/ha for 100 days
Forage Rape	270	90-110	23
Swedes	200-250	170-250	54
Stubble Neeps	200-250	60-100	34
Grass	300		

Inside finishing rations would need to look at combinations of Barley, Soya, Sugar Beet Pulp and proprietary Lamb finishing Pellets. We would like to get volunteers to weigh batches of lambs on different types of rations. This should be brought to the March monitor Farm meeting and look for volunteers by the June meeting.

Health

There also needs to be an awareness of veterinary issues including the risk of Coccidiosis associated with bringing in hill lambs with no resistance to the disease (because they have not been previously exposed) onto pasture that has already been grazed by in-by sheep.

Pneumonia is also a risk factor when housing lambs for finishing. Stronger lambs are less susceptible and there would be a definite advantage if lambs are weaned well before housing. Weaning is an added stress as is housing lambs and the combination of both at the same time can just tip the balance and make lambs more susceptible to disease in general, and pneumonia in particular.

A point that arose several times in discussion was that it is important not to let lambs go back and lose condition as it is even harder and more expensive to get that condition back on them later.

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Early Weaning

This could be particularly relevant to whether lambs on slightly poorer hills. The suggestion is that lambs could be weaned in August, perhaps when the last of the hill sheep are being sheared. It would be excellent if some volunteers were willing to split their whether lambs weaning $\frac{1}{2}$ in August while returning the other half to the hill and to monitor the weights of both batches. The principal behind early weaning is that by 12 weeks of age, lambs are not drinking a significant amount of milk from the ewe and if they are weaned and offered adequate grazing, they will perform well.

Castration

The group felt the importance of castrating Shetland hill lambs at the earliest point possible should be stressed. To not castrate is a high risk strategy and you could end up with completely unsalable animals if you take that risk.

Overall aims

- Add £10-12 of value to a proportion of Shetland lambs by finishing them for the Christmas market
- Move as many lambs as possible away from the store market hopefully lifting the value of those sold store
- Encourage the use of a better type of ram i.e. more fleshy types
- Early weaning then ship in time for an 8 week finishing period on the mainland
- With lower stocking rates on many hills we should perhaps also be considering the marketing of hogs at 2-3 years of age straight off the hills.

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It was suggested that producers on Shetland work together in order to fill a truck to transport the lambs to the abattoir and this was achieved in 2018. This partnership negates the issues individual farmers have trying to find a market for a few lambs at a time, both in terms of arranging haulage on the mainland and finding an abattoir interested in taking the lambs.

From the experience of some of the group members it does seem possible to lift the value of Shetland hill lambs by around £10-15/lamb after all costs compared to selling them store in the autumn.



In 2017, John Abernethy from Twatt, had Shetland hill lambs that would have sold for only £2-3 in the store ring in October. He decided instead to finish them, so housed them and fed them on concentrates and silage for around 10-12 weeks before they were slaughtered in January in time for the monitor farm visit to the Shetland Abattoir.

John spent about £8/lamb on feeding but when killed they averaged 11kg carcass worth £3.00-3.30/kg dead weight. This lifted their value to around £35, deducting abattoir costs of £13 leaving a clear margin of over £10 per lamb after costs, demonstrating that there are financial benefits of finishing lambs on Shetland.

Another group member tried early weaning of some of their hill lambs in summer 2018 to see if it improved their performance. They previously noticed that there was a significant drop in the growth rates and performance of their lambs on certain hills around their farm between August and October/November, when the lambs are traditionally weaned.

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They tried weaning some of these lambs in August and then brought them in-by onto better grazing to maximise weight gain in these lambs.

The Shetland Hill Lamb group has a lot of knowledge and experience of finishing Shetland hill lambs.

WHAT HAS CHANGED ON FARM

The Shetland Hill Lamb Group had no direct implication for the Shetland Monitor Farm at Bigton but it has successfully encouraged co-operation among a significant number of community group members. In total around 2400 small Shetland Lambs were finished in 2018 and shipped to mainland abattoirs in time for the Christmas market. This took lambs generally worth less than £5 in the store ring in September and allowed them to achieve an average value of over £35 which still left a clear margin after deduction of all costs. Feed costs varied from around £7 to £15 per head depending on how they were fed. Lambs on forage crops were cheaper to feed than those fed concentrates. The lambs were shipped in multiples of 600 which is the number required to fill a livestock transporter. Shipping, abattoir costs, transport on the mainland, insurance, commission and levies came to a total of £5.15 per head. In 2018 the lambs achieved a price of £3.70/kg provided they graded 2-3L for a lamb within the 8-12 kg carcass range. Lambs shipped to an abattoir in Shropshire averaged 9.5kg giving a gross price of around £35 which less killing and shipping expenses, deducting the higher end feed costs of £15 per lamb and an initial value of £5 left a margin of around £10 per lamb.

Those shipping these lambs were also encouraged by the small amount of weight loss suffered by these lambs during transit. This will be a result of the lambs suffering less dehydration due to being weaned long before shipping and been used to taking feed and water when compared to shipping freshly weaned lambs.

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Prospects

The project is of potential benefit to many Shetland Sheep producers. There are around 950 agricultural businesses in Shetland that are registered with RPID and submit a SAF almost all of which have sheep. It is estimated that at least 60% of the registered businesses produce some pure bred Shetland lambs and would potentially benefit from an improved market for these lambs.

In future years there is definitely scope to increase the number of lambs shipped from Shetland for the Christmas market provided they are within spec, grading 2-3L with a carcass of 8-12 kg.

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