



Lifeline: In the Middle Ages, I believe that wool was Kent's most important export and source of wealth.

Ollie: Sadly not today! Today, we get 80p per fleece! Many farms burn the fleece, it's not worth the transport and the admin costs. Our business is breeding sheep and selling them for meat.

How does that work? Well, we have 150 breeding ewes. From them, we hope to have 200+ lambs. Some of the ewes' lambs we keep, to build up the flock, but the rest either go to slaughter at 3 months (about 40kgs), or we might sell them on the West Country to fatten.

So what kind of sheep are they? Our breeding ewes are Cheviot Mules, which means they are Cheviot ewes crossed with Bluefaced Leicester, and we mate them with our own Texel rams. *Texel?* Texel is a breed of sheep originally from the island of Texel off the Dutch North-Sea coast. Texel are hardy, docile and tough – and so are their offspring when crossed with another breed, like Cheviots.

Do all sheep look the same to you? Is that why you paint numbers on them? Not at all! We get to know them all, they've all got different habits and behaviours. And they recognise us, as well. They know me when I go out

What about sheep dogs? Are they relevant in today's world? Absolutely. Especially here in Kent, where we need to move the stock a lot to new pastures, our 4 collies are essential. We have the amazing Millie and Floss, and now my own puppy, Juno. Trained sheepdogs are very sought after; a good collie will fetch £1,000 to £2,000.

What's the sheep breeders' calendar? We introduce the rams to the ewes in October, and the lambs are born in the spring, in late February or early March. Nowadays we are able to bring our ewes into season at the same time, and so our lambing season is very hard work but predictable. In June, the lambs go to market and its shearing time for the ewes.

How do you compete with the massive sheep producers, like New Zealand? That's got easier, because nowadays the Japanese and the Chinese are hoovering up the NZ production. So here, lamb prices are up now by £30 -£40 a head compared with 3 years back. We are getting £100 - £140 for a spring lamb which was just unheard of a decade ago.

How has the business developed? Do your lambs go to the supermarkets? We used to send our lambs to auction, so probably some did. But 7 years ago, we began sending our lambs to a local abattoir and selling them boxed, direct to neighbours. The business has grown. This year we will sell 40-50 boxes. So we are doing more and more local business, straight from our farm to your table.

Is it hard work? Yes! It starts at 7am, when we drive round, looking at the stock. Sheep are hardy but we have to worm them, and trim their feet. And we move them regularly to give them the best pasture. Lambing is 24 hours a day, and shearing is exhausting.

What do you enjoy about sheep farming? I love being outdoors, I love helping our ewes to deliver the newborn lambs.

And what do you hate? The escapees! Sheep can be stupid. They try to get through the fences, and get stuck. Or when they are in lambs, they roll over and get stuck on their backs and can't get up! Also we have trouble with dogs and owners who don't keep their dogs on a lead. Dogs love chasing sheep, and when that happens, we can lose a dozen lambs in just one incident, through miscarriage.

Is climate change affecting you? Definitely. Winters are not as harsh nowadays, which is good news in some ways but it increases the parasite and worm burden. The cold isn't killing the parasites as it used to. And the grass can be very dry in spring.

Thank you, Ollie, and good luck this spring!

Note: sadly the Martins are leaving West Farleigh, heading for a bigger farm in Devon so this is your last chance to come to the last Lambing Day on Sunday March 6th, 2022. Bring the kids! It's free, it's educational! There will be a Tombola, hot dogs and a raffle. Not to mention the excellent tea and homemade cakes courtesy of the Parish Council. All proceeds to the Kent Air Ambulance.