

Farm Facts

- 260ha sheep, beef and arable farm
- 1,050 breeding ewes and 260 ewe lambs
- Suffolk and Texel cross mule ewes mated to performance recorded rams
- Finished lambs sold direct to the abattoir
- Farmers Weekly Sheep Farmer of the year Award in 2015

Richard and Helen Roderick farm Newton Farm, a mixed farm in the Brecon Beacons National Park. The farm has grown from 90ha in 1989 to 260ha today.

The 1,000-ewe flock now consists predominantly of black face Suffolk and Texel cross Mule ewes, crossed with either Charollais, Abermax or Aberfield rams delivering a lambing percentage of 192%.

The breeding cycle begins using teaser rams in early September across the whole flock. The entire rams are then introduced in the last week of September. Ewes are scanned mid December, housed and sheared prior to Christmas. The system developed for winter housing of ewes is aimed at minimum labour and feeding cost. The aim is to make high quality silage in early June each year, clamped in two pits.

The two silage clamps are sited in the centre of each shed providing four 50ft faces from which the flock can gradually work their way through the pits. This means one person can feed 1,000 ewes without using any machinery. Ewes are fed silage only until 2 weeks before lambing, when concentrates are introduced. With a view to keeping it simple, rolls are fed with a snacker. Trough feeding a large flock of sheep can be very labour intensive. “Feeding with the snacker is much faster and easier” Richard comments.

“Making good forage is one of the most important things we can do.” says Richard. We aim to make our silage around the second week of June when the grass is still young and of good quality.

Our best high red clover leys are positioned into the middle of the clamps so that as the ewes eat through the clamp the quality of the silage increases with the demand for additional nutrition in their run up to lambing.



Table 1 Comparative clamp and round bale costs

| Ensilage Dry Matter Losses and Ensilage Costs Comparing Clamp to Bales (example for a three cut grass system with 300kg N applied/ha) | | |
|---|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | CLAMP (Ensilaged at 24% DM) | BALE (Ensilaged at 30% DM) |
| Fresh matter yield (after wilting) FM t/ha | 38.3 | 30.6 |
| DM yield t/ha | 9.2 | 9.2 |
| In silo losses (%) | 17.7 | 11.7 |
| Silage remaining to feed (t DM/ha) | 7.6 | 8.1 |
| Harvesting costs £/ha (Mowing, tedding, baling, chopping, carting, sealing) | 313.10 | 413.30 |
| Cost £/ha DM fed | 41.20 | 51.02 |

Self feeding of silage has the advantage that expensive equipment is not required and labour is somewhat reduced as the animals remove the silage themselves. A successful self feeding system needs to control dry matter intake and minimise wastage of silage. Stack height should be less than 1.5 times the height of the sheep being self fed. This avoids the silage being eaten out at the base which would cause the stack to collapse onto the animals and the restricting barrier.

One challenge however is to protect the silage against vermin and bird damage. Mr Roderick comments that “it is essential that the clamps are sealed properly and we have found vermin a problem when using straw bales to weight the pit. In recent years we have used rubber mats and this has really helped keep the clamp sheet unblemished.”

Whilst Table 1 highlights cost saving in respect of making clamp silage in comparison to round baling Mr Roderick sights the labour saving element as a key feature of his efficient system. Typically the ewes would be eating around 5 – 6 large round bales per day. To manoeuvre those bales from the stack into a ring feeder inside the shed would take around two hours per day. With the indoor self feed clamp it takes around 10 minutes a day to move the barriers saving around £120 per week in labour alone. Machinery and fuel savings are significant too.

According to the 2014/15 Welsh Farm Business Survey results paid labour and power and machinery costs contribute around 25% of lamb production costs in Wales. The innovation shown by Mr Roderick with his feeding system demonstrates the opportunities for improved business efficiency, creating a more sustainable business for the future.