Lambing Time at Lower Winskill

Lambing time is the busiest time of year on the farm. This is when the adult female sheep called ‘ewes’ give birth. Unlike cows which can give birth at any time of the year, most sheep breeds can only be mated with the tup (the male sheep) in the autumn, and the ewe flock on a farm usually gives birth more or less together over a period of a few weeks in the spring. For the farmer this means an intensive period of non-stop work that is part of a year round cycle of flock management which begins in the autumn when the tups are put to the ewes.

From mating with the tup to the ewe giving birth is a period of nearly five months. In the upper dales the tups used to be put with the ewes on the 5th of November so that lambing time would begin around the 1st April to coincide with the first growth of grass in the more sheltered fields. The mating or ‘tupping’ as it is called usually takes place in the meadows where the ewes are put a couple of weeks or so earlier to feed on the after growth of grass called ‘fog’ which grows in the late summer and autumn after the hay is made. Feeding on the ‘fog’ helps get the ewes into good condition for ‘tupping’.

One tup might serve up to fifty or so ewes, and a harness might be put on the tup which holds a coloured marker against the tup’s chest so that when he mounts the ewe the coloured mark is rubbed onto the ewes lower back and shows that she has been mated. After about sixteen days which is ovulation cycle of the ewe, the marker is changed to a different colour and ewes mated after that time and any ewes which mated unsuccessfully earlier will have a different coloured mark on their back. In this way it is possible to separate the ewes into groups according to when they will give birth, and in larger flocks all the ewes with the same coloured mark might be kept together over winter.

After tupping the ewes are moved back to pastures, to rest the meadows and let them freshen during milder periods of weather. As temperatures fall going into winter and night frosts become more frequent grass growth ceases so that from November there is little fresh growth for the sheep to eat and they have to manage on what ever grass is still palatable. If snow is forecast the ewes might be moved back into the meadows where there might be

some fresh grass for them, and they can be more easily looked round and fed if snow does come. Traditionally sheep were only given hay as a supplementary feed, and then only when it snowed and they were unable to feed on grass. Modern management makes greater use of bought in concentrated feedstuffs which provide a source of vegetable based protein, fibre and sugars as well as vital minerals and trace elements. The more prolific lambing breeds require concentrated foodstuffs every day in the weeks before lambing as their bodies and metabolism are considerably stressed.

In larger flocks it is common practice to scan the ewes a couple of months or so before lambing using an ultra-scan scanner to identify which ewes are carrying twin lambs and triplets. Ewes with only a single lamb require less supplementary feed and over feeding them can result in the single lamb growing too much and presenting difficulties at birth. Correctly judging the amount of supplementary feed to give to sheep before lambing is very important, too much can be as harmful as too little, if the ewe gives birth in poor condition she is more likely to have weak lambs and might even have no milk to feed them.

It has become commonplace to bring ewes into purpose built sheds to give birth, especially on larger farms. Here the ewes can be monitored around the clock and any problems at birth more easily spotted and dealt with. The animals are also warm and dry. However, bringing sheep in and placing a lot of ewes and newly born lambs close together is not without problems. The new born lambs are vulnerable to contagious infections which can sometimes be extremely virulent and cause heavy mortality.

At Lower Winskill the ewes give birth outside in the more sheltered meadows. Lambing time begins in late March so the weather can be bad and there might be barely twelve hours of daylight to go round the ewes. Two factors make this system possible. Firstly the meadows are surrounded by dry stone walls and whatever the wind direction the ewes are able to find shelter at some point along the base of a wall. Without the shelter provided by dry stone walls the ewes and newly born lambs would be too exposed to bad weather and cold. Secondly this system works because of the innate mothering instincts and skills of the ewes. To go out at first light on a wild March morning into a meadow and find a ewe with

newly born lambs well and dry tucked under a dry stone wall is always a special and rather humbling experience.

By careful observation it is possible to tell when a ewe is ready to give birth because she will seek out often seek out a sheltered part of the field close to a dry stone wall and lie down on her own away from the rest of the flock. After a while she starts to arch her neck repeatedly and become restless showing that her birthing contractions have begun. She will stand up from time to time and circles around where she has been lying smelling the ground and sometimes scraping at the grass with her feet. This behaviour might last an hour or so and is followed by the ewe straining and pushing as she is lying down, during this time she might again stand up and circle around smelling at the grass, but more excitedly this time as birthing fluids are expelled from her vulva onto the ground. Eventually the fluid filled sac called the 'waterbag' is expelled from her vulva, when this bursts the ewe might get up again and smell where the birthing fluid fell onto the grass. Shortly afterwards in a normal birth the front feet and nose of the first lamb emerge from the vulva, and as the ewe lies down and strains further the whole body of the lamb is pushed out quickly. The ewe will then stand up and immediately begin to lick her lamb. This begins the bonding process which is vital to the survival and well being of the lamb.

The newly born lamb has only a short time to get up and feed from its mother before its body temperature falls and it weakens too much to stand. The ewe must quickly lick it dry from the birthing fluids and get it to stand and suck her first milk called colostrum from a teat on her udder otherwise the lamb will perish. It is a race against time, often in cold, wet weather and sometimes in the darkness of the night. Now the shelter provided by the dry stone walls becomes so important. And if the ewe is having twins she might have to break off from getting her first lamb to suck to give birth to the second. Her maternal instincts usually ensure the survival of her lambs, but from time to time things can go wrong and careful vigilance by the farmer is essential.

A lamb might be presented incorrectly at birth and the ewe require assistance if the lamb is to be born alive. Here the farmer with an outdoor lambing flock is at a disadvantage compared to an in-housed flock because first of all the ewe has to be caught in an open field, a far from simple task especially if the ground is wet

and slippery and darkness is about to set in. Sheep after all have four legs and farmers only two, and a ewe even in an advanced stage of giving birth is still a very agile animal. A ewe that requires assistance or a ewe with insufficient milk is brought inside where she can be more easily attended to and the lambs cared for. Most ewes, however, give birth normally by themselves, and they and their lambs stay outside the whole time. After a couple of weeks or so, the ewes and lambs are might be moved from the meadows onto the pastures, and eventually in early May the meadows are finally closed up to allow the grass to grow to provide a hay crop for the next winter. The meadows are now left to the curlews and other wild animals that make their homes there, and the dramas, high times and low times of lambing time forgotten.

A cross-bred ewe called a mule licking her newly born lamb. The lamb is sitting up but has yet to stand. Licking dries the lamb and begins the bonding process so vital for the lamb's survival and well being.

The ewe is removing birthing tissue from around the newly born lamb’s head. She will chew this and swallow it.

The lamb has been licked clean and is attempting to stand up for the first time. Note the dusting of snow under the wall. The weather at lambing time is notoriously fickle.

The lamb is now stood up. It is vital that it sucks colostrums from the ewe before it’s body temperature falls and becomes too weak to stand.

The ewe is turning to encourage the lamb to find her udder. The water-bag of a second lamb is emerging from her vulva.

The second lamb is now up on it’s feet and sucking from a teat on the ewe’s udder. The first milk called colustrum is very nourishing and energy rich. It also contains anti-bodies which help protect the lamb from contagious disease. These lambs will survive whatever the weather throws at them!

Enjoying the sunshine, these ewes and their lambs a few days old have sought out the shelter offered by a small limestone outcrop at the edge of the meadow. Natural features such as these which offer shelter at lambing time are extremely useful when sheep are lambing outside.

Close bonding with the mother ewe is essential for the survival of the lamb and its well being. As well as smell the ewe can recognise the bleat of her own lambs and will reject and push away any other lambs which come near her.

The ewe is seeking out grass where the thin snow covering has melted. Note how close her lambs keep to her. The mother ewe will know the whereabouts of her lambs even when they are not with her. The lambs quickly learn to recognise their mother's bleating when she calls for them.