

SHROPTALK



The Newsletter of the Shropshire Sheep Breeders' Association

Summer 2021

PRESIDENT'S SUMMER UPDATE

Hi Everybody,

Welcome to the Summer *ShropTalk*.

The summer solstice has come and gone - where does the time go? In the last *ShropTalk* I said we had finished lambing; how wrong I was. Back in early January we put the first six ewes to lamb plus their lambs in a nursery pen. Our old ram, Nimrod, wasn't doing too well out in the field, so we decided to put him in with them so he could have some warmth and hay. 147 days later four out of the six have lambed again. Mothers and babies, all doing well. Nimrod's last hurrah as we have since had to have him put down aged 11. It will be interesting to see if these ewes lamb again early next year.

Several things have been going on with the Society since the last *ShropTalk*. As a result of the members' survey we have started a "Tree Club" initially as a Facebook page. I had great fun designing the logo. You can read more about this initiative on page 2.

People were also asking for more information on various health topics and so we have put several links onto the website to help with this. We are also planning a film about the Breed Standards and are working with a professional film company guided by a small team of SSBA members. So, don't be surprised if you see a film cameraman at the Shrewsbury show and sale. We haven't finalised all the details yet, but we're getting there. There will also be a filmed interview and Q & A session with a vet on the so-called "Iceberg" diseases. This will be available on livestream to all members.

With new financial incentives likely to be offered here in the UK for growing trees, we are very lucky to have a sheep breed that is "Tree Friendly". This aspect of Shropshires was first discovered several decades ago by Graham Allan, a Scottish shepherd working in Denmark. Without his initial grazing experiments, would we ever have known about the breed's unique selling point? In recognition of all the pioneering work Graham has done over

the years to define the system for grazing Shropshires in Christmas tree plantations, Council has awarded him a Life Membership of the Society. You can read more about Graham later in this newsletter.

As a result of changes to the Breed Description, reported in the Spring issue of *ShropTalk*, Sue Shimwell and I have updated the Critical Selection booklet. This will be going to press very soon and a copy will be sent to every member of the Society.

In the middle of June, I sent out 130 emails to members who hadn't yet Birth Notified this year's crop of lambs. The deadline of the 30th June has now passed and there is a charge of £6 per lamb to birth notify any lambs.

One thing I noticed from this is that some newer members were unsure of how to birth notify. I have provided guidance and hope I have helped them. However, if you are unsure how to do any of the SSBA's paperwork or need advice on anything else sheep-related, please contact your mentor. They should be able to help and, if not, they will find the answer for you. If you don't know who your mentor is, contact the Secretary and he will be able to tell you.

For those of us who lamb early enough to have managed to get lambs to market, hasn't it been a good year? Prices have been high and for an extended length of time. Long may it continue. Sue and Mark Shimwell have written an article on this and it makes very interesting reading.

We have two Society sales coming up and I am looking forward to meeting as many of you as I can. I, for one, really missed this annual catch up last year. Things are beginning to open up as more and more of us are getting the vaccine, so maybe there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Finally, as the domestic football season has finished we have all (well some of us) been able to enjoy the Euro 2020 tournament. England, after 55 years of disappointment made it to the final, pity Italy, was a step too far. My voice should return soon. Look after yourselves, your family and your sheep.

Alison Schofield

THE SSBA'S NATIONAL SHOW AND SALE



Saturday 24th July at Shrewsbury Livestock Market

57 SHROPSHIRE ENTERED
(23 males and 34 females)

CATALOGUES AVAILABLE FROM
Halls Website week commencing 12th July
(www.hallsgb.com)

ON-LINE BIDDING IS AVAILABLE
Download the MartEye App - it's easy to
download and register with MartEye.
Bidders have to register with the Halls icon
on the app, once it is loaded.
Buyers have until noon the next day to
collect stock from the market.



**ONCE UPON A TIME.....
BEFORE THE SHROPSHIRE
BECAME AN OFFICIAL BREED**

SSBA Member, Peter Tavernor (Shebdon Flock), has discovered a couple of old agricultural books owned by his Grandfather, and possibly his Great Grandfather. They date from the mid 1800s - well before our breed became officially recognised. Here is a fascinating excerpt from one of them, describing sheep in Shropshire at the time, which sheds more light on how the breed may have developed:

"In Shropshire the Cotswolds and Leicesters have not only gained ascendancy, but have modified the old breeds, some of which were once celebrated for the fineness of their wool. The old Shropshire sheep were horned, with black or mottled faces and legs; in stature they equalled the Southdowns, but were not so compactly made, and were longer in the neck. They were active and hardy, and thrive on scanty pasturage. The fleece of the wethers averaged 2 1/2 pounds, and the carcase weighed from 14 lbs to 16 lbs per quarter. Between this sheep and the Dorset a cross breed, much heavier in the carcase and also in the fleece, was cultivated by many farmers, although the mutton was of inferior quality and the fibre of the wool coarser; the increase of weight however, both in carcase and fleece, was deemed advantageous, and a counterbalance to a somewhat depreciated rate of price per pound.

In the hilly districts a smaller variety with fine wool was found; the flesh of this breed was excellent, but the carcase seldom weighed more than 12 lbs per quarter.

Of the old Shropshire breeds of sheep that of Morfe or Morf Common was once the most celebrated, especially for the fineness of the wool, in which it scarcely if at all yielded to the Ryelands. The Morfe, situated on the left bank of the Severn below Bridgnorth, is a tract of waste land five miles in length and from two to three in breadth and has from ancient times been noted as a sheep rearing district. The true Morfe sheep had small horns, and had a black or mottled face and legs; the fleece was very fine, and weighed about 2 lbs; the weight of the weather was about 13 lbs, per quarter, of the ewe 9 lbs. When the Merinos were first introduced into England, crosses between them and this breed were expected to succeed, and Dr Parry commenced his experiments with Morfe ewes, which however he soon exchanged for those of the pure Ryeland breed. Why the Morfe breed should not have answered Dr Parry's expectations we cannot tell; certain it is that at one time the wool of the Morfe Common sheep was celebrated for all those qualities in which a fine short staple ought to excel."

GRAHAM ALLAN IS AWARDED LIFE MEMBERSHIP OF THE SSBA



Graham receiving his Life Membership certificate from his wife, Sue, at home in Skive, Denmark.

Shropshire sheep breeders owe Graham Allan a huge debt of gratitude, because he was the first to discover that our breed can be grazed safely in conifer plantations. Graham went on to develop guidelines for managing Shropshires in tree plantations and promoted the system successfully to many tree growers in the UK and northern Europe.

Scottish-born Graham has worked as a shepherd in Denmark for several decades. Back in the 1980s, he was involved with running some grazing trials using improved meat breeds in conifer plantations. The first experiments were carried out with Leicester sheep and later Shropshires, Dorsets, Suffolks and Oxford Downs. Shropshires proved consistently the most reliable breed for grazing grass and weeds without damaging the trees. However, Graham quickly realised that there is more to the job than just putting them in with the trees and leaving the rest to the sheep.

Learning by experience, Graham produced detailed guidelines for the use of Shropshires as an environmentally friendly method of weed control. He has written several articles and given many talks on the subject. His expertise was

instrumental in exporting the concept to several other countries, including the UK.

Graham's guidelines were also the basis for the SSBA's "Two Crops From One Acre" booklet. He generously helped the Society to produce this publication, providing many of the images and refining the guidelines for grazing management in conifers as additional information became available. The 2nd edition of the booklet was produced in 2008 and the 3rd in 2016.

Although Graham is now retired in Denmark, he is still interested in sheep and regularly advises members of the newly formed "Shropshire Sheep Tree Club" on Facebook.

Graham said: "What a surprise when my wife presented the certificate to me from the SSBA! I feel it is a great honour that you have given me and I am proud to receive it. I now need to live many more years so that I can enjoy the membership!

"I have followed the Shropshires' progress in the last years and seen how they have increased in popularity and become a well known breed as they deserve to be. Once again thank you for this honour."



RamCOMPARE

In 2019, Shropshire rams joined the national RamCompare trial for the first time. Two sires, Ushers Alexander and Hayne Oak LX:171343, were used on North Country Mules at Dupath Farm near Callington in Cornwall,

Their crossbred commercial progeny, born in 2020, were monitored all the way through to slaughter, and then compared with other crossbred lambs sired by Charollais, Hampshire Down, Meatline, Suffolk and Texel rams on the same farm. Elsewhere in the country, similar trials on another seven farms were running using a different mix of rams. All results were analysed together and released to the industry in May this year.

Although the two Shropshires were not ranked in the top 5 for any traits of Phase II of RamCompare (which included 65 rams, used across 8 farms) they performed very creditably.

Bridget Lloyd of RamCompare has given us a short report, which puts the Shropshires' performance into the context of the whole 5 Year RamCompare trial. This compared 280 rams from 11 different mainstream terminal sire breeds: Beltex, Bleu de Maine, Blue Texel, Charollais, Hampshire Down, Meatline, Poll Dorset, Southdown, Suffolk and Texel. Shropshires only participated in the final year of the trial.

Ushers Alexander was placed 57th out of 280 high genetic merit rams used, ranked for on-farm growth rate. He was also in the top third of rams for loin muscle depth. HayneOak LX:171343 sat mid table for muscle depth and scan weight,

and had a higher overall carcass merit than Alexander.

Bridget will be able to give us more details in a few weeks time, and really tease out the positives in the Shropshires' performance. These are just the headline results. However, it already shows that our breed does have potential to be marketed as a commercial terminal sire again. The two rams have done incredibly well, especially given that our breed has been performance recording with Signet for only 15 years. Most other breeds in the trial have been Signet-recording for 30 or 40 years.

Phase III of RamCompare will get underway this autumn, and four high genetic merit Shropshire rams have been selected to take part (see table). They all score highly for Terminal Sire Index, a measure of their ability to produce profitable slaughter lambs.



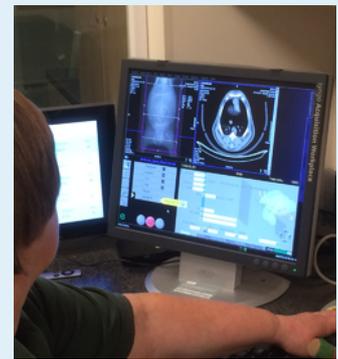
Above: Hayne Oak 1343, the ram provided by Liz Bowles in 2019, has his second crop of lambs on the ground this year at Dupath Farm with data to come from around 90 lambs.

CT SCANNING STARTS AGAIN



With the relaxation of some Covid restrictions, breeders who record their Shropshires with Signet were invited to take promising ram lambs to the mobile CT scanner for a whole body scan.

The scanner is exactly the same type that is used in human medicine to diagnose certain medical conditions. When scanning lambs, it identifies total yield of muscle and fat in the whole carcass, as well as in key areas such as the gigot. It also takes skeletal measurements, such as spine length (longer spines produce more lamb chops). This year, the Alderton Flock (Peter and Pippa Geddes) and the Cefn-Carnau Flock (Rob and Alison Kerby) scanned a total of 10 Shropshire ram lambs. The results will show which are the best future sires for carcass composition traits. The data is also incorporated into the Signet evaluations for the benefit of the whole breed.



SHROPSHIRE RAMS SELECTED FOR RAMCOMPARE III

Ram-Compare Farm	Breed of Ewe	Ram Prefix	Ram ID	Terminal Sire Index	Shropshire Breeder
Mark Exelby, Yorkshire	North Country Mules	Cefn-Carnau	ABB: 1900349	256	Robert Kerby
Adrian Coombe, Cornwall	North Country Mules	Hayne Oak	LX:201718	223	Liz Bowles
Alwyn Nutting, Mid Wales	Aberfield	Alderton	LU:2000893	273	Peter & Pippa Geddes
Duncan Nelles, Northumbria	Lleyns	Ushers	KX: 1900850	269	Aubrey & Marion Webb

SHROPTALK

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For individual flock news, check out our Facebook page:

"Friends of Shropshire Sheep"

And our new discussion group page:
"Shropshire Sheep Tree Club"

NEW INITIATIVES IN RESPONSE TO THE SURVEYS

Breed Standards Film

Given the difficulties of organising an on-farm workshop or a meeting during the Covid pandemic, Council has decided to invest in the production of a short film to explain the breed standards. Content is being overseen by a small group of breeders: Alison Schofield, Mark and Sue Shimwell, Claire Jakeman and Rosie Lee. The filming and editing will be carried out by a professional company. The film will be available on the SSBA's YouTube Channel.

Flock Open-Day And Vet Talk: An Introduction To Sheep Health Schemes - With On-line Streaming

Open Day at Hansnett Farm and Showle Court in Herefordshire on the 12th September. There will be a talk from Belmont Farm and Equine Vets on the main sheep health schemes and iceberg diseases.

This will be followed by a discussion on choosing lambs to keep in the flock, to marry up with the revised critical selection booklet. Farm walk at both venues.

New members are very welcome, and for anyone that can't attend there will be on-line streaming of the vet talk.

Shropshire Sheep Tree Club

The SSBA has launched a new discussion forum through a Facebook Group called "Shropshire Sheep Tree Club". This should help SSBA members to exchange knowledge and advice about keeping Shropshires in all kinds of plantations.

The suggestion was put forward by Pippa Geddes who explained: "Having produced the 2nd and 3rd editions of our *Two Crops From One Acre* booklet, I know that we are still on a learning curve when it comes to managing Shropshires in deciduous trees. Tree growers are now using Shropshires in many different species, which may require slightly different sheep management techniques. We also have a lot of people who are new to sheep-keeping, as well as new to tree growing, so hopefully this forum will help them. The Tree Club page is managed by Rob Kerby and Harvey Clay, and currently it has 72 members.



MEMBERS' SURVEY RESULTS

Back in the Spring, the SSBA sent an on-line survey to all UK members who had been in the Society for longer than 12 months. The aim was to find out what breed society activities would be of most interest to them, and what other issues we need to prioritise. We also wanted to know a little more about our members' flocks and how they run their sheep enterprises.

We were particularly keen to find out which members graze their sheep in tree plantations, because we see this as an area of great opportunity for the breed in the future. There is likely to be increasing emphasis on environmentally beneficial farming regimes - and we want to ensure the Shropshires are in the forefront of that.

A second survey was conducted with new members, who joined the Society in 2020. The main aim of this was to find out what we can do to support our "newbies" and help them get settled into the breed society. Overall, from both surveys, we had 121 responses, which has helped us build up a good picture of what our priorities should be in the short and medium term.

Here's a short summary of the main findings. In the panel adjacent, there's an update on how the breed society is responding to members' needs.

About Our Members

Meat Marketing: Just under half (49%) of respondents sell their finished lambs through a livestock market; 42% sell direct to the public and 33% sell direct to an abattoir or butcher. Just over a third of members sell Hogget (12 to 18 months old) and 27% sell animals for mutton (over 18 months old).

Farm Assurance: Only 19% of our members said they were Farm Assured.

Organic Flocks: Only 9% of respondents farm organically.

Shropshires for Crossing: 28% of respondents cross Shropshires with other breeds. The same % had sold a Shropshire ram for crossbreeding in the past 3 years.

Shropshires in Tree Plantations

Some 52% of those responding to the existing members survey run their sheep in trees. The figure was 62% for new members. Some 44% of existing members and 59% of new members are considering planting trees.

Topics of Interest to Members

The Number One topic of interest to members in both surveys was "Understanding the Breed Standards". Three quarters of new members wanted help in this area, and 54% of existing members flagged this up as being a priority for them.

The second highest priority for new members (73%) was "The Shepherd's year" (a calendar of what to do with your sheep and when). As would be expected, this was not such a high priority for existing members (42%).

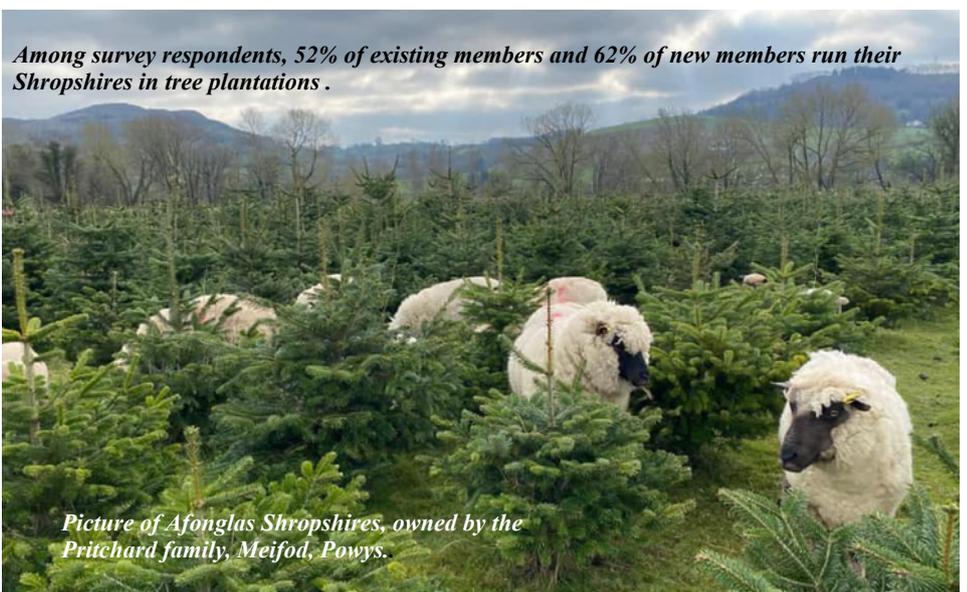
"Herbal Leys and Alternative Forage" was the second highest ranked topic for existing members (47%). It was also popular with new members (63%). So, too, was "Grazing Shropshires in tree plantations" - 66% of new members and 30% of existing members responding positively to that suggestion.

Half of new members and 44% of existing members were interested in "Grants Available for Tree Planting".

Preparing sheep for the show-ring was of interest to 43% of existing members and 47% of new members.

Signet Recording and RamCompare was of interest to a fifth of existing members and 44% of new members.

There was fairly high interest in sheep health schemes for Maedi Visna and Scrapie Monitoring amongst both groups of survey respondents. A high proportion of new members also wanted to know more about Scrapie Genotyping (41%) but this was not so popular with existing members (20%). John's Disease Accreditation was of interest to around a quarter of respondents in both survey groups. Around a fifth were interested in EAE Accreditation.



Among survey respondents, 52% of existing members and 62% of new members run their Shropshires in tree plantations .

Picture of Afonglas Shropshires, owned by the Pritchard family, Meifod, Powys.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT: **BODY CONDITION SCORING**

In the second of a series of articles covering sheep husbandry and veterinary topics, Rob Kerby (Cefn-Carnau Flock) looks at why it is important to assess the condition of your ewes and rams in the run up to tugging.

- Body Condition Scoring (BCS) is an important tool for assessing the health and condition of your sheep.
- If ewes are too fat at tugging, they may not get in lamb. Equally, if they are too thin, they may also not conceive. And if they do, are less likely to have twins or remain healthy through pregnancy.
- BCS is particularly relevant to the management of breeding ewes, but can be applied to tups and is essentially the same technique as when assessing lambs for slaughter.
- Body condition is assessed by handling the animal over and around the backbone in the area of the loin behind the last rib.
- Using the finger tips, first feel the sharpness or roundness of the lumbar vertebrae. Secondly, feel and assess the prominence and degree of cover over the horizontal processes. Then assess by feel the amount of muscle and fat under the ends of these bones. Finally, assess the eye muscle (on the loin) and its fat cover by pressing



the fingers into the area between the vertical and horizontal processes. You have to practice!

- The scale of scoring is 0-5, using half points. BCS 0 is rarely seen, the animal would be extremely emaciated. BCS 5 would be very fat.
- Shropshire ewes would ideally be kept in the range 3-3.5.
- Ewes will lose condition when lactating and rearing lambs, and might be expected to be at 2.5-3 at weaning.

- The ewe will need to build condition post-weaning to be at 3.5 for tugging.

- One BCS point amounts to approximately 12% of the ewe's body weight. Between weaning and tugging it will take 6-8 weeks on good grass to gain 1 full BCS point.

- BCS should be maintained at 3 through to lambing.

- If a ewe has a BCS that is lower than expected, this may indicate an underlying disease, or problems with her teeth, especially if she is an older animal,

- A fat ewe BCS 4 (perhaps one which did not lamb, or lost her lamb) may not conceive and if she does conceive may have difficulty lambing. So when the main ewe flock is building up for tugging, she needs to go on a diet
- Rams should be at BCS 3.5-4 at start of tugging and will lose weight through tugging
- A really good resource for this is the [EBLEX Sheep Better Returns Programme manual 4, sections 2-6.](#)

JUNIOR MEMBERS NEWS: THE **REDSTREAK FLOCK**

Hi, my name is Jamie Woodfield and we have the Redstreak Flock which we started in 2018 and are based on the Herefordshire-Shropshire border.

The flock is named after a variety of cider apple which is one of the varieties that we grow and we currently have three tups, 38 breeding ewes as well as this year's lambs.

Our sheep are kept on our 60 acres which are a mixture of pasture and orchards, from which we also produce hay and small bale haylage. In March this year we had a successful lambing and have recently sold eight of our lambs in the market at Ludlow and received a good price.

I had no experience of sheep until we started our flock, so everything is a

learning curve, but my ambition is to be able to sell quality tups for breeding and build up the flock.

I have recently just finished the work towards by GCSES, having not been able to sit exams because of Covid. I will be awaiting the results in August, after which, if successful, I am hoping to go to Reasheath College to study agriculture.

During the holidays and on weekends I help with the cider orchards and also work part time for a local builder. I also enjoy riding my motorbikes and I am a member of Orleton YFC.



SHEEP MEAT PRICE BOOM

During the first quarter of 2021 demand for prime lambs, hoggets and cull ewes was resulting in record prices at all UK livestock markets. The demand had been created by a shortage of all classes of sheep being sold both liveweight and deadweight and can be attributed to various factors. Many farmers were concerned that a 'no-deal Brexit' would have a detrimental impact on demand in 2021 and ensured stock, where possible, were finished and sold by the end of 2020. This led to a tight supply of old season lambs in the first quarter of 2021. In addition, a strong export demand for British lamb pushed up prices. The unseasonal Spring weather, which held back grass growth, resulted in a shortage of Spring lambs coming forward onto the market.

UK lamb production in the first 4 months of 2021, at 3.4 million head, was down 300,000 on the corresponding quarter in 2020 and in April 2021 the lamb kill was down 8% compared with April 2020. The low number of both old season and new season lamb coming onto the market in April has meant all classes of lambs being sold at prices not seen before for the time of the year.

Traditionally prices for Spring lambs peak at Easter and then tail off as more come onto the market. But this year prices have increased since Easter with some of the best Continental lambs making more than £4/Kg liveweight.

As more lambs came onto the market during May, prices started to ease but were still buoyant and, in the week ending 19 May 2021, the average market price was £3.25/kg LW, which is 60p/kg higher than the corresponding week in 2020. (AHDB)

All pedigree breeders must cull hard to prevent inferior stock being retained and/or sold for breeding and should be taking advantage of the high prices being achieved through the markets. This is what we have done in the Brereton flock. A pen of Shropshire lambs sold at Market Drayton on 5 May averaging 39.5 kg bodyweight and sold for £3.68/kg achieving £145.36 each.

For newcomers to the breed, when selecting finished lambs for the butcher/market, to obtain the best price it is essential that lambs carry the correct level of finish i.e. not too lean nor too fat.

To determine if lambs are ready first weigh them, we generally select ours at 42-44 Kg, then handle across the loin and shoulder, you are looking for a good level of finish, handle the dock and across the ribs. Too much fat present in these areas is a good indicator of fatness throughout the carcass. For a more detailed description download the AHDB publication *Understanding Lambs and Carcasses for Better Returns*. In addition visit your local market, handle the finished lambs, talk to the market staff who handle and grade the lambs into groups containing the same level of finish.

Mark Shimwell

OFFICIAL SOCIETY SALE AT WORCESTER MARKET SATURDAY 14TH AUGUST

As announced in the Spring edition of *ShropTalk*, the SSBA is holding a second official sale of pedigree Shropshires this year at Worcester Livestock Market. This venue is well positioned just off the M5 and easily accessible to the east and west.

The auctioneers, McCartneys, are well known, with plenty of expertise of pedigree livestock sales. The sale will be held on the same day as an official breed society sale of Zwartbles as well as a general store lamb and cattle sale.

There will be no show of Shropshires, but all sheep will be inspected prior to the sale by breed society inspectors. Usual Shropshire sale rules will apply.

The closing date for entries is 16th July. Entry forms and catalogues will be available from McCartneys 01905 769770.

WEBSITES WITH SHROPSHIRE STOCK FOR SALE

For those who are looking for new stock but who are unable to attend the Society Sales, there are two websites where Shropshires are advertised:

Sell My Livestock is the main site and the SSBA has its own exclusive portal www.sellmylivestock.co.uk

Signet performance recorded Shropshires are also advertised on the Sheep For Sale page of the **Signet website**. Click on "Sheep Search", and then select "Sheep for Sale" from the drop down box.

www.signetdata.com.

We are not able to display "stock for sale" or "stock wanted" adverts on the SSBA's Facebook page, because this is against the rules of the social media platform..

EMAILS SENT TO OFFICERS AND COUNCIL MEMBERS

All Officers and Council Members of the SSBA do their best to reply promptly (within 48 hours) to emails they receive concerning Society business. Emails sent to the President, Secretary, Registrar, Treasurer, Sales Officer and Registrations Clerk will now receive an automatic acknowledgement that the message has been received.

Please remember that most of our Officers and Council members are unpaid volunteers and should be treated by breed society members with civility at all times.



Shropshire ewe lambs from the Shimwells' Brereton Flock in Cheshire - running with some of the couple's Charollais lambs.