



SHROPSHIRES IN CHRISTMAS TREES AND WOODLAND



My name is Gavin Hogg, I originally trained as an arborist, and have always had a deep love for the countryside and conservation issues. I have lived at Penpont, a 2000 acre estate in the heart of the Brecon Beacons National Park, for 30 years now. It has been in my wife's family since it was built in 1666. Since arriving we have been attempting to achieve a viable future for the estate, by diversifying into different revenue streams, through agriculture, forestry, tourism, growing organic fruit and vegetables, and other activities.

1. What made you decide to choose Shropshires?

I had heard about their ability to graze around and under Christmas trees and within orchards. I have been growing Christmas trees for nearly 30 years. I have always tried to be organic in my approach to growing them, but small trees invariably get swamped by grass and weeds, and ultimately, I had to resort to spot spraying with glyphosate. But this was not something that sat comfortably with me, so I decided to give Shropshire sheep a go.

2. Size of plantation?

It's about 2 acres, but the sheep also have access to a patch of mature woodland, which is about 1/2 acre.

3. What type of trees are they grazing in?

The plantation trees are all Norway Spruce, the traditional Christmas tree. The plantation is surrounded by mixed hedges, predominately hawthorn. The small woodland has Ash, Scots Pine, Cherry, Oak, Hazel.

4. How old are the trees?

Christmas trees vary from 2-year olds, when they are planted through to 25-year-old.

5. Do you move them to alternative grazing once the grass has gone?

So far, the grass has sustained them throughout the main season. I move them out in winter, because that is when we let the public into the plantation to cut their own trees. I have another paddock that has two horses in it, which is about 4 acres, and they part share it with the horses for the winter months.

6. Can they graze at any time of the year?

I was warned to keep them out when the trees flushed up in spring, but this year they have been in with the trees, and I have seen them browsing. It was suggested that if they had rock salt or a mineral lick, they would be happy and leave the trees alone, and that certainly seems to be the case.

7. Management of your land before you bought Shropshires?

I would mow the perimeter of the plantation weekly (it was part of the camp site) and spot spray the young trees once or twice a year depending on growth. I would then have to strim in between the trees at least twice a year - approx 2-man days a strim.



8. Handling ability (easy to manage)?

It was suggested that I should get them used to coming to a bucket rattling with sheep nuts in it... it didn't take long. They now come to a shout in expectation of a treat. If I am taking them from paddock to paddock, they will follow a bucket of nuts. I don't have a sheep dog, and try to avoid loading them into a trailer. They are big and heavy once mature, so you do have to have strength to handle them for shearing or dagging.

9. What size flock are you working towards?

I will probably keep the flock about the size it is. My life is busy enough, and they are here to perform a function, and hopefully provide some benefits over and above selective weeding. I was recommended around 3 ewes per acre, and certainly 6 ewes did the job perfectly.

10. Market for lambs?

To be explored. Ideally, I would like to sell some as stock for people who are interested in Shropshires who might like to graze them in amongst trees. I think we will have some killed for our freezer. What I don't know is whether or not I have bred a prize-winning ram lamb!

11. Do you feel it's been a cost-effective alternative to chemicals?

As a self-employed person, you forget to account for your time. If you just look at the capital costs it would take a few years to pay back, but when you start to look at the time benefits, I would say that they are a cost-effective alternative.

12. Do Shropshires fit in with your organic and eco plans for the estate?

Overall, yes, they represent a small part of a complex jigsaw. They have removed our need to use glyphosate in that area of business. They provide an interest to visitors to the estate, and a sustainable local source of meat and wool for us as a family. Above all they provide a service keeping the weeds down around the Christmas trees.

13. Are they doing the job you expected of them?

Yes, I have been very impressed by them. They have kept the grass down around the trees, and I have not experienced any wayward grazing, they even avoiding newly planted young stock.

14. Would you recommend them?

Yes, for people in a similar situation to me. As an exercise in small scale agroforestry, I can't fault them. It is necessary to have an alternative paddock to put them into when you need to, and a handling area, or a set of hurdles you can set up



Gavin and Davina Hogg, of the Penpont Estate, Brecon, Powys.
www.penpont.com

If you would like more information about the breed or are looking to purchase Shropshires, please contact the breed society's Sales Officer, Claire Jakeman, 07766 238346.

Shropshire sheep are also advertised on the website: www.sellmylivestock.co.uk. Buyers are advised to select only pedigree registered sheep to ensure that they are purebred.