

SHROPSHIRE DOING A GREAT JOB ON THE FRINGES OF DARTMOOR

Shropshires look so at home on lush lowland pastures that it's easy to forget that they're very versatile and can thrive in much more challenging conditions.

Perhaps their built-in toughness comes from being the most northerly of all the British Downland breeds: Their ancestors roamed the upland plateau of the Long Mynd in Shropshire and the heathland of Cannock Chase in Staffordshire. Wherever their resilience comes from, the breed certainly has what it takes to do well on SDA (Severely Disadvantaged) land.

This is something that SSBA Member, Roger Howell, knows very well. His 150-acre Lukesland Farm lies just one mile from Ivybridge in Devon, with land stretching to the edge of Dartmoor. Roger, who farms in partnership with his wife Amanda, rents out the majority of the land under annual grazing licences and runs one holiday home. He also grows 35 acres of Christmas trees - and that area is the home to the Lukesland Flock of Shropshires (flock letters VP).

Roger grows mainly Noble Fir which does well in the local conditions. He also grows Nordmann Fir and a decreasing number of Norway Spruce, as the market for that is declining. Nearly all the trees are sold to the wholesale market, with less than 50/year sold direct to consumers.

The first 20 Shropshires were introduced to the plantations 16 years ago. Roger had heard from a friend about the tree-friendly nature of the breed and was keen to see if they really were effective at controlling grass and weeds in plantations. Over the years, the Lukesland Flock has expanded to between 30 and 35 ewes, and Roger has developed a clear and workable system for managing the sheep.

Lambing starts in mid-March - with pregnant ewes out during the day and coming into a barn at night. Lambing percentage is low at around 120% but Roger has no rich grass to flush the ewes at tugging and wants to run a relatively low input system. Ewes with lambs go out into the plantations when lambs are about 2 weeks old.

"The plantations are split into 2-acre plots so I can manage the grazing and keep the sheep moving onto fresh grass. I still need to cut some weeds with the number of sheep I have, as the grass gets away from them in June," says Roger. "But they can then stay in the trees until November. They are only out of the trees from November to March and even stay in the trees when they are budding." Roger keeps rams out of the trees when tugging has finished, just because he has a convenient paddock and not because of tree damage.

The best female lambs are kept as replacements and most of the rest of the lambs are sold as stores



Roger and some of the Lukesland Flock, with Dartmoor rising in the background.

in October, with a few going the following spring. Some may occasionally be sold to breeders, but the trees are Roger's priority.

Roger has found many benefits from keeping Shropshires in the plantations. These include:

- Less mechanical weed cutting;
 - Preventing soil erosion;
 - Removal of most of the need to use herbicides;
 - Removal of most of the need to use insecticides to control aphids and mites in the trees, because the presence of sheep preserves natural insect predators.
- And there's one additional benefit - Roger likes keeping sheep!

Interesting Family Fact: Roger and Amanda's son, Matthew, is a full time athlete in the Taekwondo National Team. Having competed in the martial art since he was five, he took up a sports scholarship at Nottingham University whilst studying electrical engineering. He has a string of National Championships and international successes to his name and is currently aiming for the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles.

For more info on how to manage Shropshire Sheep in tree plantations, download the free guide: "Two Crops From Once Acre"

It's available from the Shropshire Sheep website: www.shropshire-sheep.co.uk