

# SPRING

## AND A FEELING OF APPREHENSION

By Jayne Duveen

Spring here at Godmans Farm is usually a time to be jubilant for us and a time for new beginnings. Living on the farm we experience this acutely with the birth of our lambs and calves. The hedgerows are bursting with May; the first bluebell has been spotted and the tips of the trees are a pale green and are about to burst into full leaf.

This year we already have quite a number of lambs born as the ewes started lambing six weeks ago. Michael put the rams with the ewes in the middle of October last year instead of the middle of November. His reasoning is that the weather patterns are changing and becoming more erratic. The weather is now warmer earlier in the year with hot spells sometimes experienced even as early as February (I make a point of saying this because I want you to be aware of how changing weather patterns are causing farmers to have to rethink our usual habits.)

The breed of sheep that we have chosen here at Godmans Farm is Romney, a breed that has been roaming the Sussex land for centuries. We chose Romneys because they lamb easily due to their diamond shaped heads and the fact that, on average, they only have a single lamb. The beauty of this breed for us is that we intervene as little as possible with their lambing.

We were taught this by Martin Hole who has farmed with Romney's for generations. His fine-looking flock roam the most beautiful land stretching across the Pevensey Levels towards the sea.

Over the past few weeks, Michael and I have been regularly walking quietly through the flock checking for newborn lambs. They tend to lamb either at dawn or dusk and coming across a lamb that has just been born is a sheer delight for us. It is one of the highlights in the farming year - to experience birth. Before a lamb gets too lively, we quietly turn it on its back and spray the naval with iodine to prevent any possible infection. Then we swiftly depart so that the mother can connect with her offspring.

the  
SUSSEX  
peasant

GOOD FARMED WELL



At dusk we walk through the sheep and check that every lamb has connected with their mother before nightfall. Very often at this time the lambs are having their “mad half hour” where they form groups and chase each other across the field, jump off banks, play hide and seek around the trunks of trees and spring into the air seemingly with joy as they play. We stop and spend many a good half hour watching the young have their fun. As the light fades, we watch the ewes call their offspring to foot. Very often the flock is tightly knitted together throughout the night to protect each other from predators such as foxes, crows and even stray dogs.

Unlike many sheep farmers at this time, we do not dock the lambs’ tails or castrate the males. We like to leave our animals as nature intended as much as possible. Docking of tails is done to help prevent them getting something called flystrike. This is one of the conditions in sheep that we have to watch out for most. It usually takes place when the weather is wet and mild. Flies lay their eggs into the fleece of the sheep, usually in the dirty areas around their back end. The eggs hatch out and the maggots then burrow into the sheep. Apologies for those of you that are faint hearted, but this is a reality that has to be faced when looking after sheep. It means that we have to pay extra attention during these times and keep their tails as clean as possible. We do this by clipping them out if necessary.

Moving from the flock to the herd we had the delight of watching the cows buckaroo with excitement as they were released from the winter housing into the fields. Now that they are outdoors it is a good time for them to start calving which indeed they have done. “Buttercup” produced a very sturdy looking heifer (female) calf, now named “Daffodilly”. Buttercup is a young cow and a little nervous, so we watched from afar as Daffodilly quickly nuzzled her way to finding her mother’s teat and take her first drink. We are always relieved when this act is complete as the first milk, colostrum, is so important as it is full of concentrated nutrients that helps to build the immunity of the calf.

On checking the animals this morning all seems to be well with all mothers and their offspring. Since then, we have had four more calves, all arriving with little problem and looking very healthy. They have all been spritely and eager to feed which is very good news for us.

**We like to leave our animals as nature intended as much as possible.**





As well as tending the flock and herd during this busy time we have also begun spring field work. We have been chain harrowing which breaks up and levels heavy soil. It allows air movement and root aeration which helps the soil to breath and improves water infiltration. I have thoroughly enjoyed this operation on our little Massey Ferguson which is as old as me! During the glorious weather I have been trundling backwards and forwards on this little tractor and feeling a great sense of satisfaction as I see the pasture behind improved.

We have also brought in a contractor to do some liming on a couple of fields. We add lime to the soil to increase the pH, making it less acidic and more alkaline. Lime is made from ground limestone rock and naturally contains calcium carbonate and magnesium carbonate. We lime because it helps to increase the worm activity, improves the soil structure and makes the pasture more palatable for the animals.

Finally, this year for the first time we have drilled a couple of fields with an organic chicory grazing ley because chicory is deep rooting, and we are trying to find ways of improving the soil structure with the increasing drought conditions. Within the mix, as well as chicory there is ribgrass, red clover, white clover and a ryegrass.

We have also drilled a couple of different fields with a simple herbal ley mix on old pastureland that needs bulking out. A variety of grasses are in this mix including ryegrass, timothy, cocksfoot, meadow fescue, white clover, red clover, ribgrass and festulolium.

All sounds good and productive, doesn't it? So, why am I apprehensive? I know farmers are known for complaining about the weather so here goes. I am worried about the lack of rainfall, the frosts and cold winds. As we move the animals around the farm the grass is rapidly diminishing with nothing to replace it. The pastureland on the farm has already taken a severe bashing with the lack of rain last year. We have not yet seen the grass recover and with the unusual weather conditions this spring I am seriously worried whether they will recover at all and whether we will get any hay crop this year. I do hope that when it comes round to summer that my complaining is just usual farmer behaviour and that all comes right again in the end.

Deep breath!

