



Building a brand in the west

To improve returns, farmers need to gain ‘market power’ by creating brands which reflect the true value of what they produce. Ólas Hill Farms is a great example.

John Noonan*
Teagasc advisor, Westport.

When 40 sheep farmers from the Mayo areas of Tourmakeady, Louisburg, Ballycroy, Newport, and Achill came together in 2004, their aim was to improve the quality and marketing of their iconic Mayo Blackface breeding stock.

The premier sale became one of the leading sheep stock sales in the country. A sign of their growing success was the ever increasing number of male Mayo Blackface lambs not required for breeding.

From the start, the fledgling group of leading farmers looked at developing markets for the male lambs, working with various factories and Teagasc researchers, developing the product in terms of weight and cover of saleable lambs. By 2021, the group, now expanded to a membership of over 400, was sending over 30,000 lambs to Kildare Chilling.

The group has had a partnership with Kildare Chilling since 2014.

General manager Seamus Finnucane praises the “universal lamb” from Mayo as it fits into many markets, with the majority going to the Nordic countries as well as Germany and France.

Now, the group, along with Kildare Chilling, Bord Bia and Mayo County Council, are creating a brand for Mayo lamb, calling it ‘Ólas Hill Farms’.

Seamus McMenamin, Bord Bia sheep sector manager, says: “It’s a standout product that is more slowly and naturally produced. The sheep spend 90% of their lives on hill sides, making it the closest you get to organic (without being organic) and that really appeals to consumers’ desires for sustainability and high welfare. The product itself is unique in its taste texture and quality.”

John McLoughlin, Knockbreaga Newport, farms 300 Mayo Blackface ewes. John is the third generation of his family on the holding, comprising of one-quarter enclosed land and three-quarters commonage on the Owenduff Nephin mountain range in west Mayo.

“Our stock reflects the type of land and what it is capable of carrying, with the sheep spending most of their time on the mountain,” says John.

Ewes are mated in mid-November, returning to the hill after a month with rams, and remain there until late March, when they come home to lamb down.

After lambing, twin lambs and lambs born to two-year-old hoggets remain on the enclosed land and the remainder go back to the commonage.

At shearing in late July, lambs are weaned, with replacement ewe lambs returning to the mountain, spending more time with their mothers and ensuring they are “hefted” on their specific area of the commonage. They are weaned at mating time.

In 2021, John had a weaning rate of 0.9 lambs sold/ewe to the ram. Meal usage worked out at 40kg/ewe, with the majority of this used in finishing the male lambs.

The remainder of John’s lambs were sold in mid-March at 40kg liveweight, helping to fulfil the aim of supplying lamb all year around to the factory.



John Noonan and John McLoughlin.



“Farming commonage is a community activity,” says John. “It’s not an easy job to do solo and I rarely go to the mountain alone.”

The neighbours work together, as did their parents and grandparents, building knowledge and experience that is invaluable in times of fog and poorer weather on the mountain.

After weaning, male lambs are finished on aftergrass and some meal for smaller ones.

“The producer group gives greater access to the market place and allows for better drafting of lambs,” says John.

“The group’s transport is efficient on loading and facilities. For a relatively small producer, the benefits of being able to have lambs transported to the factory is huge.”

Seamus and Noreen Hughes farm at Derryveeney Tourmaceady and run a flock of 170 Lanark ewes along with 12 Connemara mares and the resident stallion, Melodys Boy.

Ewes are mated starting October 26 for six weeks, then go to the mountain until end of January, when they return for scanning.

Doubles are kept on enclosed land while singles go back to the mountain until the second week of March, when they come back to ‘green’ lowland. They are not fed any meal pre- or post-lambing. The figure for lambs

sold/ewe to the ram was 1.35 in 2021.

Doubles and triplets are fed one pound/head of meal from early March and are fed after lambing at the same rate until the end of April, when enough grass becomes available.

After weaning in early August, lambs are drafted to kill with a carcass of 17-18kg, with triplets and smaller lots all slaughtered by late January. The figure for meal fed per ewe was 18kg in 2021.

Seamus says: “There’s a good price and a definite market for older ewes, which at one stage would have to be nearly given away – there’s a value on them now.”

John O’Donnell farms 90ac of heavy clay soil at Gurteen Westport, carrying a flock of 220 Belclare cross ewes with 390 lambs at foot.

He normally lambs during the first week of March, but last autumn decided to sponge 40 ewes to supply him with some early lambs for the group and also provide him with strong replacements for the autumn.

“I am moving away from carrying hoggets over winter, as they are not



John Kennedy, sheep manager at Kildare Chilling, with Pat Chambers, Micheal Conway and Tom Gill.

justifying the cost involved,” says John.

Ewes are housed in mid-November, and fed good-quality silage over winter.

Meal feeding starts three weeks pre-lambing, with feeding continuing for a month post-lambing outdoors. In 2021, 45kg of meal was fed per ewe.

Lambs are finished off grass, with drafting starting normally in early June at a liveweight of 46kg to get 20kg carcass. John’s ideal cross is the Belclare ewe crossed with a Suffolk ram.

Meal is used on the last group of triplets and late lambs in mid-October.

“The group provides a great service in terms of easy access with booking, no waiting or travelling for hours, good price and great kill outs,” says John.

“The transport provided by Gill transport is an added bonus for its quality and reliability.”

Organisation is key. Administration of the producer group is managed by Breege Biggins and Josephine Kelly, who organise sales, book in lambs and deal with the day-to-day



Noreen Hughes, Josephine Pearse, Breege Biggins and John Noonan.

issues of managing such a large number of farmers' output.

"We liaise closely with the committee and the main organising farmers, namely Pat Chambers, Tom Gill and Micheal Conway, who are at the lorry at each loading, checking paperwork, ensuring numbers are correct and advising on presentation cover and weight to individual members," says Breege.

On a Monday morning, the farmers ring Josephine Pearse, who takes the bookings at the office in Ballinrobe. "Whether a farmer has five, 50, or 500 lambs, all are treated the same," says Josephine.

"The farmers say that a key benefit is that they have less time waiting around than if they were bringing the lambs to a factory themselves," says Breege.

The office then contacts Pat Chambers and tells him how many lambs are to be transported – if necessary, there could be several trips in one week.

On Tuesday afternoon, the animals are gathered onto the truck. Tom Gill ensures the animals are loaded correctly. Sheep are kept in their original groups, which makes it easier for the factory.

"Each farmer has a unique number and colour which identifies his animals – red, blue, orange, green or



Louis and John O'Donnell.

purple. Popular numbers are 1, 7, 11, or 10," says Breege.

Pat Chambers informs the farmers of the price in advance and brings the lambs from Westport to Kildare Chilling.

Branding

Branding the group's lambs as Ólas Hill Farms will give them an identity in international markets, showing off their credentials as healthy, green fresh and wholesome from the west of Ireland.

This will add value to the product, helping the west of Ireland shepherds to have a more viable and sustainable future.

"After a successful lambing season, the members of the Mayo Blackface Sheep Breeders Group are looking forward to the annual breeding sale on Saturday 25 September 2022 and to the factory lamb sale season over the next few months.

"The Lamb Producer Group are hoping for a good season, having rebranded the group as Ólas Hill Farmers in partnership with Kildare Chilling and Bord Bia to reflect the wealth of knowledge and tradition passed down through the generations of hill shepherds that goes into the production of lamb meat on the mountains in the west of Ireland," says group chairman John Joyce.

Look up Ólashillfarms.ie for more information on the group and the lambs we produce.

**John Noonan is former group chairman and currently a committee member.*