



FEELING



Richard Barr on life as an amateur shepherd

If someone had said to me 20 years ago that I would become an amateur shepherd I would have dismissed the idea as absurd. The only way I ever planned to take my lamb was with mint sauce.

But I reckoned without the gentle eccentricity of my wife Kirsten who had cherished an ambition to have a small flock of Wensleydale sheep. To me Wensleydale meant cheese but when these animals arrived they did not resemble cheese at all.

We started with four ewes - sheep with distinctive Rastafarian hairstyles. Apparently four sheep do not make a flock and it was not long before they went to Suffolk for a few weeks

of pleasure, as a result of which they all (or all but one) came back with coloured markings on their backs to denote that they had been 'covered' by a Casanova among rams whose task it was to 'service' a whole flock of sheep.

When rams are required to do their duty for the country they have a harness attached to them which contains a marking device that colours the backs of the sheep when they are mounted. The colour is changed from time to time so that one can then calculate when the lambs are due.

After their excursion (for them like going to the Costa Brava on a package holiday) the sheep were duly returned with smiles on their faces. The first 'event' was relatively painless and provided by the one sheep that had

not been marked. We had thought that she was just not 'crumpet' in sheep terms but the reality appears to be that she either helped herself one night or perhaps they hit upon a new and innovative position that bypassed the harness.

Whatever the method, and a week or two before the rest of the sheep were due, the neighbours rang to say that one of our sheep had had triplets.

The field is L-shaped and they had gone round to the invisible (to us) part of the L. We dashed there, lugging emergency equipment - water, gauze, scissors and brandy (for me) to find the mother sitting down and three new lambs wandering around blinking at the unaccustomed daylight.

In order to lure the mother you are

supposed to drag one of the lambs along the ground. That proved difficult - and seemed hard on the lambs so we half carried, half led the new offspring. They were in hearty voice and were bleating for all they were worth in their reedy high pitched voices. It did the trick and the mother lumbered after us.

We have some stables (where the dogs normally sleep). In preparation for the sheepy maternity ward the dogs had been evicted and a man with a very powerful pressure washer steam cleaned the place. If the Queen were to have her babies in the stable it would not have been cleaner. Here the mother sheep and the triplets were installed to begin their lamby life.

Sheep are not very well designed.



Pictures by Richard Barr of his flock, wife Kirsten and daughter Sophie

SHEEPISH

Even though they are capable of bearing several lambs (up to six I am told) they have the equipment to feed only two. There was therefore a risk that the weakest triplet would be discarded to enable the other two to survive.

To cope with this situation lambs sometimes need tube feeding. This involves poking a long tube into the lamb's stomach (to loud protests) and then injecting food directly. A lamb has to have something called colostrum in its first six hours or it will not survive.

So we, the new lamb owners, had to learn (well Kirsten had to learn) how to poke the tube down into the lamb without it going into the lungs. If you pump food directly into the lungs you have a drowned lamb on your hands.

To make sure it goes the right way, you have to listen at the tube for sounds of breathing, and you also start by injecting a very small amount of fluid then wait to see if the lamb starts to gurgle.

She got it right with these lambs first time, and the smaller two were soon filled up without feeding. Later they were to learn to bottle feed which is much pleasanter.

It is much safer for the lambs to be born inside, but there is no way of predicting when that might happen, so we had to be on high sheep alert. That meant visiting them every two hours day and night. The night time duties fell to me because of my ability to wake up, go out to the sheep in dressing gown and boots, check that

they are alive and not giving birth, go back to bed and be asleep again within two minutes.

Lambing is not without its tensions and stresses. One set of triplets was still-born and another lamb just died for no apparent reason, but we ended up with a little flock of gambolling, leaping, fun-loving lambs that would melt anyone's heart.

They say sheep are stupid, but a recent study has shown that sheep are much more intelligent than has hitherto been thought. They are apparently as able as monkeys to plan and make executive decisions. We now realise that when they pore the ground, they are actually working on the solutions to quadratic equations.

Alas lambs don't stay lambs forever.

Now in the autumn - several months later - we have a respectable flock of fully grown sheep which have become so tame that they expect to be petted every time they are fed. Using their executive skills they work collectively and individually to get the most out of us.

They insist on the best quality food so that they can keep their brains in top condition while they rewrite the history of the universe. Turning them into chops is now out of the question: they eat us out of house and home, not the other way round - leaving us with only enough money to buy a jar of mint sauce but with nothing to eat it with.