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CASTRATION AND TAILING SYSTEM

**Prioritising animal health and welfare is a vital driver to also improving productivity for a large-scale sheep farming operation in the Scottish Borders.**

Cliftoncote Farm in the Bowmont Valley in the foothills of Cheviot near Yetholm is the centre of the 5,500 acre farming business focusing on sheep, a beef suckler herd and contracting for the **Freeland-Cook** family...[READ MORE](#)

CONTENT FROM THIS BROCHURE FEATURED AS AN  
ARTICLE IN **THE SCOTTISH FARMER** (10.09.22)

THE SCOTTISH  
**Farmer**

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**The stratified sheep system from Blackfaced hill sheep to Mules and quality lamb producing Meatline crosses to Romneys is managed by Allistair and Claire Freeland-Cook along with their daughter Emma, 19, when she is home from her studies in for an agriculture degree at Edinburgh University.**

Their son Thomas, 17, works with Allistair's brother Daniel in the contracting business and running the herd of around 140 Sailer cross Hereford sucklers producing store cattle and females for sale.

First generation farmers Paul and Angela who started the business when they took on the tenancy at Cliftoncote in 1984 are now semi-retired leaving the management of the enterprises to their sons and families. Daniel's wife Heather is having time off as a lawyer to raise their two young daughters Maisie and Poppy.

Third brother Murray who works off the farm, trained as a butcher but has had a change in career and is at the SRUC retraining in wildlife and conservation management.

**“We want the welfare of the lamb to be a priority and we want it to be growing as well as it can. Castration is a stressful time for the lamb and we took the opportunity to trial the new system to help reduce that stress”.**

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The Freeland-Cooks operate a health strategy with their vets with the emphasis on preventative medicine and handling of ewes and lambs is kept to a minimum with numerous health procedures carried out once sheep are gathered.

Lambing 5,000 ewes plus 500 of the 2,000 ewe hogs from February to the end of April produces a big workload for Allistair, Claire and Emma with their self-employed stockman Robert Redpath.

The hill ewes are the last to lamb outside from mid-April and the difficulties of castrating these lambs within the first seven days of birth led them to undertake a trial with a new system **ClipFitter** which in March this year was approved in Scotland for legal use on lambs up to three months old.

The Freeland-Cooks have found the new relatively stress-free system to have helped liveweight gain and earlier marketing of lambs as well as allowing lambs to be castrated later.



Emma, Allistair and Claire Freeland-Cook with Brian Eadie



ClipFitter pliers

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SCAN QR CODE FOR WORKING clipfitter DEMO





Specialist husbandry equipment engineer **Brian Eadie**

**ClipFitter** has been developed as an alternative to using rings for castration and tail docking by specialist husbandry equipment engineer **Brian Eadie** who markets the product through Eadie Bros based in Selkirk.

Blunt edged clips, applied with specially designed pliers, immediately disable the reproductive cords and nerves, limiting pain for the lamb and castrating them in an instant.

The clip remains on the lamb for around the same time as a ring on the scrotum, and often a shorter time on tails. A very visible benefit is the 'instant' recovery post castration and clips usually leave a clean, and almost invisible scar.

He describes the **ClipFitter** as a de-skilled burdizzo, but with removable blades. It has the same powerful over-centre mechanical action as the burdizzo but applies the clip right across the tail or scrotum; the clip remains on the animal to provide the necessary proof of success by removing both.

Brian says he is continuing to develop the invention, planning to offer different sized clips for different aged lambs, and work on the biodegradability of the clips.

At the NSA Sheep Event at Malvern in July this year, **ClipFitter** gained recognition when it won the trade section in a new NSA Inventions Competition.

Allistair said: "We want the welfare of the lamb to be a priority and we want it to be growing as well as it can. Castration is a stressful time for the lamb and we took the opportunity to trial the new system to help reduce that stress.

"We used the **ClipFitter** system on around 600 lambs across our different sheep this year. We were marketing our early lambs, which are finished off grass at up to 12 weeks of age, two to three weeks sooner this year which gave us an extra £15 a head on a 20kg carcass. We had identified the lambs fitted with clips and there was a big percentage of these in the early draws for marketing.



A **ClipFitter** clip being applied

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A scar-free lamb after the clip has dropped off

“The investment in the system would generate a financial benefit for breeders finishing their own lambs because there is no check on liveweight gain,” he added.

Claire said: “We used rings and the new clips on batches of lambs and we were impressed with the reduced impact of applying the clips. A large proportion of the ringed lambs lay down afterwards while none of the clipped lambs did. It is definitely ticking the boxes with welfare.”

Exceptional grass growing weather very early in the year also helped with the lamb finishing. The early lambs were averaging 350-400g DLWG and were finished at an average of 39kg. As many as 700 lambs were sold in one batch at the beginning of June.

Creep feed is introduced to lambs in April when the sheep start to get on top of the grazing and the ewes' milk yield begins to decline. The average cost of creep this year has been £10.75 which Allistair reckons is a worthwhile investment in lambs selling for £133 a head. All the April-born lambs are grass fed.

Of particular concern to the Freeland-Cooks, as well for as other hill sheep flockmasters, is the castration of the later-born hill and Mule lambs.

**“A large proportion of the ringed lambs lay down afterwards while none of the clipped lambs did. It is definitely ticking the boxes with welfare.”**

***CLAIRE FREELAND-COOK***



Lambs with their mothers showing no stress or pain immediately after castration

“We have limited shed space but the Blackfaces are happiest lambing outside, although lambing outside is not overly easy. It’s difficult to catch and handle the lambs in the early weeks as the lambs need to get enough colostrum and we also need to prevent mis-mothering.

“We’ve spent the last 15 years breeding all our sheep with hard and selective culling to bring out the mothering instincts and abilities so we only want to intervene when necessary.

**“Scanning percentages for the flocks are 140 for the pure Blackfaces; 155 for the Blackfaces crossed with the Leicester; 190 Mules; 190 early lambing flock; 165 Romneys.”**

***ALLISTAIR FREELAND-COOK***

“As soon as we get through the very busy part of lambing we get the lambs in for a number of procedures using a chute, including castration, tail docking, mineral injection, clostridia injection worming and tagging. We try to do a lot at the same time because they are new to being handled,” said Allistair.

The sheep system is closed with all female replacements bred at home. It begins with the hefted pure Blackface sheep - 900 are bred pure with a further 800 crossed with the Bluefaced Leicester to produce Mules.

A further 1,500 Mules are crossed with high index Meatline rams with around 400 first cross Mule hogs.

Two other flocks are contract shepherded for two different owners - 1,200 first cross Mules which go to the Meatline and are bred off the family’s Mule flock which comprise the early lambing flock and a flock of 1,200 Romneys.

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The Romneys are run in A and B flocks with the A flock put to high indexing NZ Romney rams producing surplus females for sale and around 25% in the B flock not selected as breeding sheep go to the Meatlinc.

To keep the lambing tight to help minimise the workload, teasers are run with all the ewes before the tups and 95% of the ewes lamb in the first cycle. All the tups are grass fed with access to good grass and energy buckets to help maintain fertility.

After the ewes have run with the tups they are given a month before they are grazed on kale and fodder beet until into January when they are brought into the paddocks. The forage crops have been grown since the 'Beast from the East' storm which depleted grazing ground for the ewes and lambs.

Scanning percentages for the flocks are 140 for the pure Blackfaces; 155 for the Blackfaces crossed with the Leicester; 190 Mules; 190 early lambing flock; 165 Romneys.

All the Mules carrying twins lamb outside and set stocked with the triplets lambbed inside. Hogs are also lambbed inside.

All the in-bye sheep are lambbed outside and rotationally graze the paddocks with 200-300 sheep in a mob. The cattle are also grazed with the sheep to top the grass. Hill sheep with singles go back to the hill and twins are kept in- by until clipping.

Up to 90% of the lambs not kept for breeding are sold finished but a shortage of grass with this summer's low rainfall will probably see that reduced to 50% this year with the remainder sold store. Lambs sold finished off the farm are all away by January-February to free up the grazing for the ewes and lambs.

Nearly all the sheep and cattle are sold through Border Livestock Exchange, a working relationship going back almost 20 years, including all the finished lamb which goes to Woodhead Bros where the emphasis on high health status and specification for premium lamb production.

Most of the lamb from Cliftoncote is well above specification with 90% making R and U grade.

All the sheep are run in social age groups at lambing and tupping time which has made a big difference in bullying and disease prevention.

Culling is hard to make the flock as easy to manage as possible. Barren ewes or those that slip a lamb are culled. Only about 1% of the Mule flock was empty last winter. They are run with the tup for three weeks. The barren ewes are screened to help pick up any health problems.

Allstair believes the way forward to reduce the use of nitrogen is in working with arable farms grazing sheep on the likes of stubble turnips in the arable rotation will improve soil fertility.

The farm has a muck for straw deal with a nearby arable farmer whereby they get the straw for cattle housing in return for the muck which has reduced costs dramatically. No nitrogen fertiliser has been used on the farm this year.

The contracting business provides services including silage making, and sowing of forage and grass crops. A 360 digger is also used for work on local estates creating tracks in forestry for truck access for timber collection.

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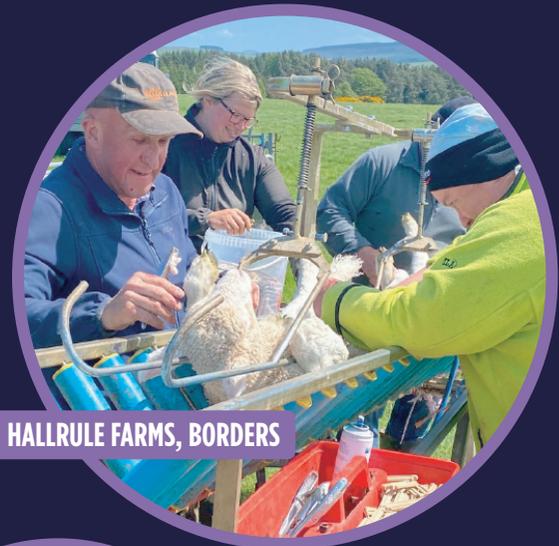
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## FIT CLIPS NOT RINGS

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- **+DLWG**
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