

By Polly Pullar

Balls to embrace change

FOR many sheep farmers, particularly those whose families have worked the hills for generations, change is rarely embraced lightly. Tradition runs deep. But when it comes to improving the welfare of the flock under his care, Dunalastair Estate farm manager Finlay McIntyre believes some changes are simply too good to ignore.

Born and raised in Kinloch Rannoch, Finlay has sheep in his blood. "I was always going to end up working with livestock," he smiles. "I've never really been interested in arable farming. A tractor is a great feat of engineering, but a good Blackie is a great feat of genetics."

Now managing the 17,000-acre Dunalastair Estate, and Craiganour at Kinloch Rannoch, Finlay is well known throughout Scottish agriculture, having previously worked as an auctioneer at Thainstone Mart. Warm, knowledgeable and blessed with an endless supply of stories gathered from farms across Scotland, he is exactly the right man in the right job. And I have always admired him.

"I wanted to move to ClipFitter because I

genuinely believed it was the right thing to do," he explains. "Once we'd made the decision, our shepherd Liam Tinney became highly skilled at using it."

With Schiehallion brooding behind the fank and grey Loch Rannoch close by, I joined Liam Tinney, Roddy Billimore and Ian Kennedy as ewes and lambs flowed through a modern Rappa handling system. Identification, worming, pour-on treatment, vaccination and ClipFitter application all became one smooth, efficient operation.

Liam patiently talked me through every stage of the process before placing the applicator in my own hands. Under his watchful eye I had a go myself. Like so many shepherding skills, it looked deceptively simple, until I tried it. There is undoubtedly a knack to it, but once mastered I could see why those using the system become enthusiastic advocates.

The science behind ClipFitter began with Professor Vince Molony, the internationally respected pain researcher and former Dick Vet lecturer, whose

work demonstrated that the lingering pain associated with traditional rubber ring castration could be significantly reduced.

Turning that research into something farmers could use every day, however, fell to agricultural inventor Brian Eadie.

Best known for developing Roxan ear tags and numerous other livestock innovations, Brian has spent a lifetime solving practical farming problems and cheerfully admits he has already attempted retirement twice. ClipFitter may yet prove to be one of his most enduring legacies. Like so many of the best agricultural inventions, it was born not in a laboratory, but from a determination to turn good science into something that genuinely works in the fank.

Instead of a rubber ring, biodegradable plant-based clips are applied using a specially designed tool. The blunt clips close firmly across the tail or scrotum, interrupting the nerves immediately while also cutting off the blood supply. Research has shown they substantially reduce the pain response compared with conventional rubber rings, while the clips naturally biodegrade over time.

Roddy grins as we watch the lambs wander quietly back among the flock. "It takes a wee bit of practice," he admits, "but once you've got the knack, I'd say it's definitely the way forward."

Having watched countless lambs ringed over many years, I found myself studying the lambs once the job was complete. They drifted back into the field with no sign whatsoever of the prolonged discomfort many of us have accepted as inevitable.

Hill farming today finds itself under increasing



From left to right: Liam Tinney, Ian Kennedy, Roddy Billimore and Finlay McIntyre

public scrutiny, particularly where animal welfare is concerned. Practical innovations that genuinely improve welfare while remaining straightforward

to use on commercial farms are surely the way forward.

After spending the morning with the Dunalastair team, I came away convinced this is one

of those rare innovations that improves both welfare and practicality. If you're still dithering, now is the time to have the balls to make the change.



Liam Tinney using ClipFitter on the lambs



The ClipFitter system in action with the Dunalastair flock