



People with vision don't grow on trees. Back in 1984 a group of visionaries comprising Department of Agriculture, ACOT and local farmers in County Mayo took on the SCAR project designed to encourage and improve the production of quality crossbred ewes from the Mayo Blackface hill ewe. Selective culling of blackface ewes and the introduction of good quality Border and Bluefaced Leicester rams meant that very suitable breeding stock could be produced for use as lowland breeding stock. The organisation of special sales of Mule and Greyface ewe lambs and hoggets at Connaught Gold Mart Ballinrobe began to attract buyers from all parts of the country. Slowly by word of mouth and because of their purchase and use by Dr Frank Crosby of UCD and Athenry Agricultural College the reputation of the Mayo Mule and Greyface crossbreds as top class breeding ewes became established. Their traits of hardiness, milking and mothering ability and their consistency at producing twin lambs made them the breed of choice for many farmers. The proof is that the same customers keep coming back for more. In fact the competition at the annual show and sale each year means that producing good quality guarantees good prices for the producer. This year will be their 23rd sale and is now a premier sale in the sheep sales

calendar. It takes place this year on Friday August 31 with a second sale on Friday, September 22.

Tom Staunton from Tourmakeady is chairman of the Mayo Mule and Greyface group. Tom sets great store on having the right type of foundation ewes to breed from. Over the past number of years he has been introducing some Lanark blood and has about one third Lanark in his ewes. This has been achieved through the use of Lanark rams and also by buying in Lanark hoggets from Northern Ireland to mate with his own rams. "The Lanark cross gives more growth in the ewe and gives her body and shape," says Tom. "They are a tight woolled sheep, good mothers, are hardy and these traits follow down the line to the mule." Tom has learned over the years the importance of purebred rams and this is reflected in the price he is prepared to pay at the sales. Many of the top Mule and Greyface producers source their rams in Northern Ireland at the premier sale in Ballyclare or from individual breeders and import them with the help and guidance of the Department. Many quality breeders in the North buy their stock rams in Scotland. Fine skin, tight wool, enough pigment and of course good conformation are absolutely vital in their eyes.

### The base breed

The Mule and Greyface breeders are so keen on maintaining high standards that they have recently set up a separate Mayo Blackface group to help foster and improve the base hill breed. This group has examined improvement schemes in Northern Ireland and Britain where selection and recording important economic traits are used to further the breed.

### Satisfied customers

I asked Tom Staunton where his main customers came from. "Farmers from Carlow, Killkenny, Tipperary, Sligo, Clare, Cavan, Galway, Kerry and Offaly come here to buy" he says. "The satisfaction rate is shown by the fact that the same men come back year after year." One such customer is John Kidd from Tullow, Co Carlow a dairy/tillage/sheep farmer. He usually buys the very best of the ewe lambs at the sale including Tom Staunton's. These ewe lambs are shorn and put onto the best grass available (a reseed if possible) and fed a barley/beetpulp mix to keep them thriving. They are mated to a Beltex ram from the third week of October. I enquired from John Kidd why he picks the Mule as his breeding ewe? "Well, they are great mothers, they defend the lamb against the fox, they get up and lick the



# The Belclare none can compare

lamb quickly, they have loads of milk, no bother to rear triplets,” he explained. John lambs all his ewes outdoors from March 1 in sheltered fields. Mortality is low, he checks out the fields up to six times per day.

At night he checks at 12.30am and again at 6.00am. All his lambs are finished to factory weights, creep is fed either by feeder or troughs, he finds kill-out percentage is excellent especially off the ewes. All his 400 mules are bred to Beltex sires, he sees them as the ideal cross to complement the mule ewe.

### Scrapie free

By insisting on Scrapie testing of rams and the use of resistant strains, the group aim to further enhance the status of their stock and this certainly proves an added dimension to what is already a very attractive package.

### An ideal mix

Using the indigenous hill breed to produce an attractive and productive breeding ewe for lowland farmers is the perfect way of integrating our hill and lowland systems. Good ewe lamb prices can help improve margins from hill flocks.

It also eliminates the problems associated with continuous use of the progeny of terminal sires as flock replacements in lowland situations.

Analysis of flock performance data from National Farm Survey (NFS) indicate that ewe productivity in terms of the number of lambs reared per ewe joined to the ram is a major determinant of flock profitability. The average rearing percent for lowland flocks in this country has remained relatively static down through the years at about 1.3 lambs/ewe. Terminal sire breeds (mainly the Suffolk) currently dominate lowland sheep production in this country with little planning involved in the production of ewe replacements - replacements being generally a by-product of slaughter lamb production. A major change in breeding policy is required on lowland farms if weaning rate is to increase above 1.3 lambs per ewe joined to the ram.

Table 1 shows the relative difference between breeds.

### Aiming higher

When producers decide that they wish to aim for a higher lambing percentage than this they are then basically looking to the Belclare crosses.

### The Belclare

The basis of the Belclare breed evolved from the work done by Dr Seamus Hanrahan going back to the mid 1960s when he assembled two flocks of prolific sheep. His aim was to produce a breed

with a litter size of two. Prolific Lleyn ewes were identified and imported here from Wales to cross with the already selected flock. The resulting progeny were the first Belclare improver sheep.

Seamus was able to use a small amount of highly prolific Finn on Texels to produce well conformed prolific sheep. These were backcrossed with Texel to give ¾ Texel ¼ Finn. By crossing with the original Belclare he ended up with the current Belclare breed which was then released to breeders.

### The facts

Over the years various comparisons have been made both on research farms and other farms. Some of these findings are as follows:

- Belclare X ewes reared significantly more lambs per ewe to the ram than

Sire of Ewe	Fertility	Litter Size
Belclare	0.94	1.89
Blue Leicester	0.91	1.71
Border Leicester	0.94	1.60
Cheviot	0.86	1.51
Galway	0.83	1.63
Suffolk	0.91	1.65
Texel	0.93	1.58
Scottish Blackface	0.94	1.48

Table 1. Crossbred ewe performance, ewes produced from S. Blackface mothers.

## FIVE VETERINARY TIPS FOR MILK FEVER PREVENTION

### WHY?

*Autumn calving dairy cows in particular are prone to milk fever. In addition, sub clinical milk fever or low blood calcium can cause reduced tone in many muscles, leading to womb infections, mastitis and poor ruminal contractions, in addition to the downer cow syndrome.*

### VETERINARY TIPS

- 1) Keep "close up" dry cows on 'bare' pasture.
- 2) Offer roughage daily (hay or straw).
- 3) Maintain and monitor body condition score (around 3). Low levels of suitable buffer feeding may be useful (avoid over fat cows).
- 4) Dry cow minerals should be fed daily. They should be high in magnesium and have no added calcium (loose minerals preferable to buckets).
- 5) Ask your vet to monitor pre calving blood magnesium levels and post calving (<24 hrs) calcium levels.



Working towards healthier herds

- any other ewe type (see Table 1);
- Belclare X Cheviots produced an extra 19 lambs per 100 ewes joined compared to Suffolk cross Cheviots and an extra 31 lambs compared to Suffolk type ewes;
  - Belclare X ewes were significantly more prolific (in terms of litter size) than crossbred ewes produced by Bleu du Maine, Rouge de L'Ouest and Charollais rams;
  - In an on-farm comparison Belclare cross ewes had a significantly higher litter size (+0.21) and number of live lambs (+0.19) than Vendeen cross ewes. The superior weaning rate achieved by Belclare cross ewes was essentially due to a higher litter size which in turn reflected a higher ovulation rate. There was also a tendency for fertility (proportion of ewes lambing) to be greater in Belclare X ewes;
  - Belclare cross ewes were lighter than any of the other crossbred types evaluated. Compared to the Suffolk they weight about eight per cent less at mating;
  - In terms of lamb growth rate, relative to the Suffolk, Belclare sired lambs can be expected to be about 1.5kg lighter at weaning; and,
  - The calculated biological efficiency index (based on the weight of lamb produced and the annual feed consumed by the ewe and her lambs) shows that when Belclare-crosses are set to 100 all other crossbred types had values less than or equal to 87.

### Upgrading your flock

Considering the shortage of Belclare X ewes available on the market there is little option at present but to follow one of two options to upgrade your ewe flock.

### Replacement flock

The first is to maintain two flocks; a replacement flock and finishing flock. These are managed together except at mating. The purpose of the replacement flock is to produce enough females for the finishing flock. Take a 300-ewe Suffolk type flock. Breed over 80 Suffolk ewes to Belclare rams, producing about 60 females each year. These are used for the finishing flock. About 20 Suffolks are purchased each year to maintain this replacement flock. The finishing flock consisting of 220 ewes is bred to meat ram breed.

### Closed flock

The second option is to maintain a closed flock and backcross two breeds to produce replacements. Again take a 300-ewe flock with a 23 per cent replacement rate. About 70 replacements are required per annum. Only rams are purchased. A proportion of the ewes are backcrossed with a different ram breed every second year. This eventually ends with a flock that is two thirds/one third of the two breeds used. The aim is to maintain a prolific crossbred ewe flock. Breeds used for backcrossing are Suffolk and Belclare. Replacements are bred as follows:

A group of Belclare/Suffolk (66/34 per cent) ewes are mated to a Suffolk ram. Males are slaughtered and females (34 per cent Belclare /66 per cent Suffolk) are kept as replacements. A further group of Suffolk/Belclare (66/34 per cent) ewes are joined to a Belclare ram. Again males are slaughtered and females (66 per cent Belclare/34 per cent Suffolk) retained. The remaining ewes are bred to a finishing ram e.g. Texel, Charollais etc.

There is an obvious niche market for quality Belclare X hoggetts and ewe lambs. This will not develop unless the society and breeders do the hard slog of organising/ promoting sales and ensuring a supply of quality animals. They have much to learn from other breeding groups in this regard. Sales take place at Kilkenny (7th Aug/1st Oct), Tullamore (5th Sept/3rd Oct), Ardee (17th Sept), Ballinrobe (21st Sept), Athenry (24th Sept), Roscommon (29th Sept) and Carnaross (9th Oct). The society's aim is that all rams sold at these sales will be scrapie resistant stock. Larry Barret from the society is anxious that the €3 million from the Minister for the breeding programme with ICBF will be used to build up really valuable data that can be used by breeders and producers. It is to be hoped that other societies will be equally enthusiastic.

### Outside interest

Belclare rams are finding their way outside the Republic to Northern Ireland and to Wales. They have been taken on board by Hillsborough research station and by well-known sheep farmer Issac Crilly who is very satisfied with them.

### The vital edge

Where output plays such a part in determining profitability the Belclare can give the vital edge in the battle to remain viable. On that score none can compare with the Belclare.