

THE *modern* SHEPHERDESS

A passion for traditional sheep breeds encouraged Sophie Arlott to become a first-time farmer and raise her own flock in the Lincolnshire countryside

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ust beyond a partially thatched limestone manor house, on a slight dip in the grass, a pair of stocky and amiable Southdown ewes are grazing contentedly. Casting a watchful eye over them through the French windows is Sophie Arlott.

"They're going to need a good clean before tomorrow," she says, referring to the county show where she will be exhibiting the best of her 200-strong flock. "I shall be down there after lunch to give them a going-over with a bottle of Fairy liquid." This is just one among the many tasks for this particular very modern type of shepherdess.

Sophie's life hasn't always involved shampooing sheep. An archaeology graduate from Bristol University, in her early career she worked in the BBC's Bristol-based natural history unit before her husband's job, and the space requirements of a growing family, brought them to this 17th-century former farmhouse in Lincolnshire, with its six acres. It was the land that set in motion a chain of events that led her to where she is today – poised to deliver 300 lambs single-handedly.

An animal-lover since her childhood in Hampshire, when her family kept three cows (an Aberdeen-Angus called Heiferlump

and two Jerseys, Daisy and Buttercup,) Sophie's first attempt at raising livestock was on a bovine theme but juggling this with family life proved to be a challenge. "Cows were incompatible with toddlers," she laughs, as her flock jostles around her legs in a hurry to reach their newly filled feeding trough. Her interest in sheep began when she saw a notice in the window of a local farm supply store for three Southdown ewes, which a local farmer was selling for £200.

"I didn't have a particular plan at the time," she recalls, resting a hand on the springy fleece of one of her ovine beauties, "other than a desire to keep pure breeds that were under threat." The ewes, Sophie says, turned out to be sweet-natured and easy to handle, so she bought a couple more at a rare-breeds sale at nearby Melton Mowbray Market. The resulting lamb, which was dispatched and butchered at the local family-run H. Dawson and Sons, was enjoyed by Sophie, her family and friends. The moment of epiphany, however, came in Easter 2010. She didn't have enough of her own lamb to feed all her guests, so she bought a shoulder. When she served up both joints, the comparison was a shock. "The butcher's lamb looked good, but, alongside the Southdown, it ➔





THIS PAGE Sophie ensures each of her lambs is content and stress-free, and is very much hands-on in every stage of their lives from their birth in April. The flock is fed on a natural diet to maintain its high quality

didn't have any flavour. It made me angry – why are we eating tasteless Continental breeds when our native sheep are so much better?"

This revelation was very timely – Sophie's husband had a health problem, which was affecting his ability to work; her two boys were now teenagers, and she realised she wanted to restart her career. Previously she had been interested in going into education but it was while on a teacher-training course that she had a crucial realisation: she didn't want to be inside all day. A farming life, although time-consuming, would at least be flexible, and the family would be able to play a part in it, too.

By happy coincidence, her neighbours with land were looking for grazing animals to control a ragwort problem in their fields, so Sophie invested further in British breeds, adding to her Southdowns with Cheviots, Hebrideans, Romneys and Lleys to bring the total number up to 100. Along the way she enlisted the help of a local countryman, and gleaned a lot of information from a one-day-a-week administrative job in Melton Mowbray Market. Most of her learning, however, has been done on the job: "Established farmers here don't pass on their knowledge readily, they expect you to earn it."

Watching Sophie hoist a block of hay into her farmyard and break it up for a flock of sooty-coloured Hebrideans, you wouldn't guess she was a relative newcomer. In the two years that she has had a commercial flock (140 lambs the first year, 220 in the second), she has been involved in every part of their lives, presiding over their births, breeding (she has her own rams) and dispatches, taking them herself to the abattoir – and then merchandising, marketing and even delivering the meat right to its final destination, which often includes the restaurants of London's West End or Harrods Food Hall. All Lavinton Lamb is personally reared and sold, and nothing goes through the livestock market system, which Sophie believes only creates stress.

At a time when the origins of our food are increasingly important, Sophie takes traceability to its extreme: "It's been called 'hyper provenance' – I'm involved in each stage of the sheep's lives and know every single lamb." But she doesn't farm this way because it is fashionable; she does it because she believes it produces a better result. "A happy sheep is a tasty sheep," she says, as a group of Romney lambs climbs up the side of a pile of hay before springing off the top. Traceability is particularly important to her clients, too, the vast majority of whom are top-end restaurant chefs, who she signed up by knocking on their doors and offering them tastings. Her approach does, however, mean that there's little

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Blaen y Nant This hill farm in Snowdonia has Welsh mountain sheep and Welsh Black cattle (01248 600400).



chance of ever going away on holiday. Sheep need to be fed and checked up on every day, although Sophie's level of expertise means that leaning over the gate and softly calling "Hello, girls" is enough to assess whether there's a problem.

Some seasons are easier than others, but most challenging (and rewarding) is the springtime lambing, for which she uses the redbrick and limestone outhouses of a farm just across the road, converted to a maternity ward for the duration. Lambing is a time of early starts, late nights and heightened emotion. "I was distraught when my first sheep died," Sophie says. "It hasn't happened again. Last year, I was present for most of my lambs and I didn't lose a single one."

This year's lambing will once again expand her flock size, and she is hoping that she can find more acreage and increase her sales outlets. Delivering a lamb one week and visiting some of the UK's top restaurants the next, there's no doubt that Sophie (who's on her way back to the house for that bottle of Fairy liquid) is a farmer for the future. 

 *Lavinton Lamb, Old Manor Farm, Lenton, Grantham, Lincolnshire (01476 585960; lavinton.com).*



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