

SHEEP

and shearful!

Sheep are a delightful symbol of **rural Britain** and a calming influence on all who see them... or are they?

Richard Barr questions this **traditional view** of everyone's favourite **woolly ruminant**

Molly smiled at Wendy. Wendy smiled back. A bond was developing between sheep and human. We currently have thirteen sheep, all of whom have names. They live something of a charmed life.

Imagine the scene. You have a meadow brimming over with grass and clover. You have – as my wife does – a penchant for Wensleydale sheep: distinctive because they are large and wear dreadlocks over their faces. Now stop imagining and watch the reality as the first four sheep arrive and bury their noses in the grass and clover. They look lost in the large field; so another four arrive. Total flock now eight. Still they look thin on the ground (though not round the girth).

Back to the imagination: how picturesque it would be to have little lambs gambolling in the pasture so that everyone can go “Aah” and “Ooh”. Consequently, four of the ewes were then loaded onto a trailer and taken to Suffolk for a fortnight of sheer bliss in the presence of the most gorgeous man imaginable (at least in sheep terms). Later they came back with smiles on their faces.

A few months on, Erin (the self-appointed head of the flock) effortlessly delivered three healthy lambs all by herself. We found her in the field and carried the lambs into the nursery we had prepared (low lights, a dangling mobile made of old empty jars of mint sauce, piped music – not *Chopsticks* or *Mack The Knife*, as that might have been considered threatening). We relaxed. Clearly sheep breeding was going to

be as easy as shelling peas. Later, Erin was to become so tame that she is now convinced that she is a human being, and more than once has invited herself into the kitchen.

The other ewes did not follow Erin's example. For the remainder, the vet had to be called out each time, and the whole process was so traumatic that sheep breeding is now strictly off the ‘to do’ list.

For a few brief months the lambs did the things that lambs do, and we all said “Aah” and “Ooh”. Then they became sheep. To accord with family tradition, none were found new homes, and none have been eaten. Worse than that, the only ram lamb had to be separated from the rest – for obvious reasons. He would have been lonely on his own, so instead of sending him to the butcher, we shelled out for a new mate – another ram. Now they both live out their lives in another field. They are deeply in love and spend most of their time gazing into

each other's eyes. They only ever show any sign of manliness when I go into their field. I have been knocked over many times by charging sheep – once so hard that I limped for a week.

Keeping sheep is not for the faint-hearted. They cannot just be left to graze safely (whatever the Bible may say about them lying down with lions). They also consider shearing to be an affront to their dignity, and they protest vigorously. For two years running the same ewe has delivered a right hook to our patient shearer, Gareth.

Then there is the limping. When I was a child my mother was the village doctor. If my brother or I grazed a knee or cut a finger, she simply applied gentian violet to the wound, usually at the same time painting a face or a car on the affected area – which immediately felt better. The same psychology applies to sheep. I am sure that they often only limp for effect, because they know that they will then be fed and dosed with blue





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Engemycin spray. At once the limping stops and they proudly display their blue feet when they rejoin the flock.

It becomes more serious when they start to smile at you, as they did the winter before last. There was snow on the ground and our sheep have not learned to graze underneath snow, and so require large quantities of hay and sheep mix. I had gone out to give them their evening meal and they all looked more friendly than usual. In fact they seemed to have toothy smiles. I looked more closely. Could the white really be snow, not teeth? I brushed against a mouth – it was warm. Not snow. Not a smile at all. Then I panicked and ran into the house shouting: “Don’t panic, don’t panic, the sheep are foaming at the mouth.”

Like most things involving animals, foaming sheep are outside my comfort zone, and there was nothing for it but to call on the services of the local veterinary practice. Naturally, the ewes had timed it perfectly – 10 o’clock on a Sunday evening.

The vet concluded that the sheep had been supplementing their diets during a snowstorm by eating things they ought not to have eaten, and that their guts now needed balancing. The remedy was egg whites and bicarbonate of soda. I don’t know if you have ever tried, in the freezing cold, to extract egg whites, mix bicarbonate of soda in a bucket and administer it to a dozen foaming sheep. If you have not, I suggest you put it low down on the list of things you would most like to do in the coming year. Sheep do not like it, and wrestling with them in the snow on a Sunday night is bad for your blood pressure.

They survived, but my advice to you is that if you see your sheep smiling, just smile back, because otherwise you are going to need a whole lot of eggs, and you will also find your bank balance seriously depleted. We later found that the sheep had made a hole in the fence and had surreptitiously been going into woodland and eating rhododendron

leaves. The odd thing was that once they had had their secret feast they then returned to their field and pretended they had never left.

More recently one of the rams decided it was time to pose for the ovine equivalent of Children in Need (*Lambs in Need*, perhaps?). He had caught his ear tag and developed a haematoma, which had to be bandaged. For several days he became a passable imitation of Pudsey. Alas, no donations have been received so far.

We have a converted barn that is used for holiday accommodation. We offer our guests the chance to meet the sheep. Molly (the sheep) excelled herself and was so affectionate to a guest (Wendy) that she has now vowed to make a return visit. A dozen sheep are an expensive marketing tool, but it looks as though Molly might have earned her sheep mix for a week. And if she does decide to celebrate by developing a limp, I will not begrudge her a small squirt of Engemycin.