



The Bleu du Maine has, to some extent, fallen out of fashion but has much to offer the commercial sheep producer believes John Davison who has based his established commercial sheep enterprise jointly on the Bleu and the Texel breeds as Neil Ryder found out. John Davison, Lough Green, Langley, near Hexham.

While the core of the business is the production of commercial breeding stock including Texel cross Bleu du Maine tups, the combination of the two breeds is also producing first class prime lambs.



Lough Green Bleu du Maine ewes.



Texel cross Bleu du Maine tups bring a steady trade at Kelso every year

The Davison family came to Lough Green in 1916 with Mr Davison's great grandfather and has remained in the family ever since adding the neighbouring Vauce Farm in 1955. Mr Davison farms with his wife, Kathleen.

Today the farming operation covers 117ha (290 acres), all LFA land lying around the 230m (750ft) contour. The farm is now all long term grass, though in the past some arable crops were grown for home use 'being very choosy where they were grown'. Grassland is reseeded as necessary with direct drilling replacing ploughing largely to reduce the need for stone picking.

The farm runs a small flock of about 15 pedigree Bleu du Maine ewes and 35-40 pedigree Texel ewes plus about 200 Bleu du Maine cross Texel commercial ewes put back to the Texel. Together they form a virtually closed flock.

The farm also has about 40 Limousin and British Blue cross suckler cows put back to a Limousin bull for both spring and autumn calving. Calves are mostly sold as stores through Hexham mart, but a few will also be finished selling through Hexham with some going direct to a local butcher. Some beef will also go to the local Carts Bog Inn owned by the family and run by Mr and Mrs Davison's son, Stuart.

“We bought our first Bleus in 1990, about ten years after the breed was first imported into this country when prices had settled down a little and the breed could be bought for reasonable money. Like many other imported sheep and cattle breeds, prices were high when they first came into the UK, and not always for the best quality animals.

“At the time we were concerned that our Suffolk cross Mule lambs were getting a little fatter than the market wanted. It was then that we went to North Sheep and saw the Bleu du Maine there. The breed stand had some big Bleu sired cross bred lambs that were in prime condition and had not gone too fat.

“Although at the time we were looking at the Bleu as a sire, we have since found that the strength of the breed for us is the female side and that it would not compete with the likes of the Texel and Charollais as a terminal meat sire,” he said.

“At the time were running a flock of bought in North of England Mules bred out of North of England (Hexham type) Blackface ewes. We used the Bleu on the Mules gradually replacing the Suffolk.

“Then came the 2001 foot and mouth outbreak. While stock on farms all around us were taken out by the disease, we remained clear. However it meant that we were unable to buy in Mules, or even move sheep across the road between our two farms.

“We then started keeping our Bleu cross Mule ewe lambs, gradually replacing our Mules using the Texel as a terminal meat sire. The farm already had a pedigree Texel flock which we started in 1995 to produce good crossing tups of the type we needed rather than those sold as breeders’ animal. This included breeding for length, but not worrying too much about heads.

“The flock is also recorded under the Signet scheme. I will always choose my sheep first and foremost on appearance and handling, and look at figures as additional information. I will always try to buy tups with a decent index.

“I also know that more and more people are taking an interest in figures before buying sheep so this is something we must offer. The Bleu Society have a recording scheme, but so far we have not taken part,” said Mr Davison.

“The Bleu cross Mule ewes were themselves gradually replaced by commercial Bleu cross Texel ewes resulting in our present flock. These, when put to a Texel tup, give us three-quarter Texel prime lambs,” he said.

“We lamb inside because of the heavy land, bringing ewes in about 10 days before lambing depending on conditions. We sell a lot of cattle during the winter, and the sheep will come in as the cattle go out. The Bleus lamb in early February, followed by the Texels later in the month and the commercial ewes in March.

“We do not scan, but check for multiple lambs the old fashioned way by handling the ewes. Normally we expect about 185 per cent lambing and will aim to rear and finish commercial lambs off grass as far as possible getting the first prime lambs away in July.

“Our pedigree Texels and Bleus will receive a little additional feed. We sell pedigree Texels through Hexham and Bleus through Carlisle. In August we sold four Bleu ram lambs to average £500; and last year averaged over £800 for 20 shearling Texel tups.

“We also sell a few Texel cross Bleu du Maine tups at Kelso. Last year six averaged £620 and this year averaged £525 for four tups. The cross works well with our Texels giving a little length to these tups.

“The pedigree flocks suit me as I have always been passionate about showing sheep. I normally show Bleus at the Royal Highland, Royal Welsh and Great Yorkshire shows plus our local Allendale and Slaley shows. I missed the Royal Highland this year as we were silaging,” said Mr Davison.

“One of the problems with breeding the Bleu is that there is not a wide gene pool and it can be difficult to find blood lines that are not related to your own. For instance I bought a Bleu tup from Stuart Goldie for £2,000 that has done exceptionally well, but the lines have been widely used within the breed.

“The Bleu is unlikely to replace the Bluefaced Leicester for use on the North of England Blackface as this is a very strong Mule area but works well and, like the Leicester cross, is reasonably hardy. The aim here is to produce breeding sheep for the commercial producer with ease of lambing, a superior carcass and not be concerned about face colour,” he said.

“There is no doubt that things will change on this farm. Stuart, our only child, has been interested in the catering and hospitality industry since before he left school and is now a trained chef. When our local pub, the Carts Bog Inn came up for sale we decided to buy it and Stuart took over the management. Three years ago.

“The inn is remote and the previous owners’ business had failed, but we believed that managed differently that that it would be viable. Stuart has since taken on another chef and is majoring on high quality food sales. So far the business is going well and this is where he wants to build his career rather than in farming.

“I am now 60 years old and while fit and planning on continuing farming for a few years yet, there will, inevitably, come a time when things will have to change. In both our Bleus and Texels we will continue to breed for size, length, conformation and good skins otherwise there will be general improvements, but no major change, in our present system.” he said.

John Davison is a former chairman and president of the Bleu du Maine Sheep Society.