> *With careful management, you can achieve some really great results.*

Grazing arable crops

Flocks of benefits

The reversion back to more traditional methods of farming during recent years has seen livestock find favour on arable farms again. *CPM* speaks to one grower who's ahead of the curve.

By Charlotte Cunningham

Farming 1200ha on the edge of Exmoor, the Speed family are located in prime sheep territory. But for Andrew Speed, the 1500-head flock are more than just a commodity, and in fact, have become a core part of the integrated management strategy for the farm's arable enterprise.

Briddicott Farm is a tenanted holding, operating as a mixed beef, sheep and arable farm, across a landscape which ranges from sea level right up to 1200ft moorland – farmed by Andrew, his wife Tracey, and their son, Robert.

Looking at the enterprises individually, the sheep flock is made up of predominantly Polled Dorset-cross breeding ewes, crossed back to either Polled Dorset or Charolais. Rather uniquely, the ewes lamb every eight months – three times over the span of two years – in January, September and finally the following May.

"We keep lambing to a four-week period using teaser rams to keep everything tight," explains Andrew. "They have to be efficient."

The flock sits alongside a 195-head suckler herd, which graze the heathland in the summer months. Whereas arable-wise, the rotation typically includes winter wheat, winter barley, oilseed rape, spring oats and spring beans, as well as some maize and lucerne for feed.

"We started grazing our crops about 25 years ago but it went out of fashion. We weren't growing as much cereals and we started milking the sheep, so it sort of fell by the wayside," explains Andrew.

Livestock revival

However, following a difficult time with a crop of OSR, Andrew made the decision to venture back into grazing five years ago – working alongside his ProCam agronomist, Emma Dennis, to ensure the management was optimum for both the crops and the flock.

"It was about January time and we realised we had a bad problem with cabbage stem flea beetle," says Andrew. "It was a lovely crop, but it was absolutely plastered in them.

"I asked Emma what our options were, and decided we'd try putting the sheep in. We grazed it right down to nothing and it bounced back and produced 5t/ha that year – that was a lightbulb moment for us which proved just how valuable grazing is in an arable system.

"We've been grazing the OSR ever since and had some really good results – our disease levels drop to zero after it's been grazed off, for example. It also encourages tillering and better canopy height. We now graze the wheat and barley too."

Emma adds: "By complete removal of the foliage, we eradicated the stem larvae growth stage – with hope we'd have less pressure on the crop as it progressed through the season. We found that not only did we improve CSFB levels, but managing the crop canopy also helped with preventing lodging.

"We've seen the likes of ADAS carry out trials on defoliation, which have often resulted in a yield penalty. The advantage with grazing is that you get the benefit of the nutrient cycling too via the manure, which feeds into the crop."

As well as the reduction in disease burden – and subsequent lower input bill – Andrew reports yield potential and quality benefits where crops have been grazed. "The two main yield-

Getting grazing right is very much an art as much as a science, says ProCam's Emma Dennis.

Somerset farmer, Andrew Speed, (pictured here with son Robert) has seen great results from using sheep to graze down his cereals and OSR crops.

Despite being hit early on with cabbage stem flea beetle, Andrew's OSR made a full recovery after grazing the crop.

limiting factors in cereals are disease pressure and the risk of lodging, but grazing addresses both of those things via management of the canopy.

"Quality wise, we mainly try to grow milling wheats and by grazing them, we've found it really boosts the quality – increasing protein content by at least 1%. We've split the fields to trial it, and you can visibly always see a line in the field between the crops which have been grazed and those which haven't. The grazed crops are always the ones that go off and make milling specification, too."

Balancing act

While Andrew has seen great success, he says ensuring the grazing of the crops is right requires careful management – and this is where he's leant on the support of Emma. "Getting grazing right is very much an art as much as a science," she says. "There's a balance between having to graze it enough, but also to ensure that soil structural damage doesn't occur or trampling of the crop."

Emma says key factors to pay attention to are the number of stock and the relevant field size, the growth stage of the crop and the timing of putting the sheep on. "Something we now ensure is that sheep don't go on until the collar diameter – the top of the root – is at least 10mm. In my mind, this ensures there's enough root reserve to come back to life after it's been grazed.

"It's also only advisable in well-established crops to ensure they don't become compromised by the sheep."

Andrew adds that grazing crops tight enough is also fundamental to success. "Our target is to get the sheep in and out of a field within seven days to ensure they're not grazing the regrowth. That said, making sure they've grazed it down enough is also just as important.

"Light grazing does more harm than good and means the sheep aren't eating the leaves at the bottom which is the reservoir for disease. You have to get all those bottom leaves either eaten or trampled in to see results. So many people try it, but only graze it lightly, which is why they don't see a response."

Emma says it's about being brave. "You have to keep them on to quite an extreme point of grazing, but also take them off in a timely manner which is why I say it's an art as much as a science.

"However, by being consistent with this, we've found that sheep are now grazing more evenly, which is helping overall production. The sheep have now become more accustomed to the grazing and as a result, are creating a lot less issues with the soils."

What's more, being able to move the sheep into clean, fresh grazing has benefits for livestock health – namely, reducing the risk of worm burdens and other pasture-related diseases, she adds. "We're lucky in the South West that our fields are quite small which makes the management of grazing arable crops much easier, as fields don't necessarily have to be sub-divided and we can move the animals around quite quickly."

This year, wheat was drilled in mid-September – earlier than usual – and will be grazed in November. OSR will be pre-Christmas and the remaining cereals post-Christmas, although this may move to December too depending on canopy height, suggests Andrew.

"We've proven it works, and it's something we'll continue to do – it's been a real lightbulb moment for making the two enterprises work together. With careful management, you can achieve some really great results," he concludes. ■

Following success in OSR, Andrew is now grazing his winter wheats, which he believes has boosted quality.