



## Hardy Hebridean takes off in Kent

What started as a hobby three years ago has turned Round Oak farm into a thriving enterprise for Norman and Ruth Coles.

They started with 16 Hebridean ewes and a ram, Winkwell Falco, but now have four flocks of breeding ewes and rams and supply meat for a number of well-known restaurants as well as marketing their own wool.

Round Oak is south of Maidstone on the southerly slopes of the Greensand Ridge overlooking the Weald of Kent, not where you'd expect to find rare breed listed Hebrideans.

Although their black horns have been seen in Kent before, it is generally only in ones or twos, usually kept as pets. But the Hebridean is a hardy breed with a good degree of resistance to worms and foot rot.

'Their thick coats mean they can live out in all weathers and the lush grass of the south seems to suit them' says Norman.

As the Hebridean is slow growing, the dark meat is more succulent and tender than that of faster growing breeds.

'Slow growing plants and animals are healthy and tend to taste better. Hebridean sheep grow at half the speed of conventional sheep and the meat is very lean with little or no fat and low cholesterol' he adds.

First years can be difficult for some flocks. But the Coles' opening season produced 32 lambs, mainly twins, but with two sets of triplets

and a few singles. Norman found the ewes to be good mothers who needed the minimum of assistance and generally looked after themselves. Only two were lost, both stillborn.

'All the mothers lambed themselves outdoors without outside intervention' says Norman. 'The mothers stayed with their lambs who were normally up and suckling within minutes'.

He had been keeping an eye on some other local sheep farmers and noticed that they had obese sheep producing obese lambs that had to be lambed indoors and gave the farmers numerous sleepless nights.

'We realised we were on to something good. They are low maintenance, or as some call them easy care sheep'.

The Coles' first sheep were bought on the Isles of Skye by Norman's cousin and transported to Round Oak which comprises about 80 acres, five of which are natural oak woodland.

Fleece is processed by the Natural Fibre Company and is available in hanks or balls. The balance is used for bed throws.

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