



Graeme aims to produce high quality wool while achieving high welfare and environmental standards

# Farming matters

Graeme Bethune argues that Britain's post-war farming policy has been a disaster for our wool industry



**SINCE** the Second World War, farming in Britain has been subject to political direction and intervention. Successive governments - British, European and Scottish - have all sought to make

farmers serve the political agenda of the day. Often the policies are worthy: ensuring our nation's food security post-war, for example, and today's environmental goals. I have no complaints about their intent; my complaint is that they do not and never have encouraged excellence or serving you, the customer, to the best of a farmer's abilities.

The main tool used to control farm output is simple: money, given as a 'subsidy'. Subsidy has been the lord of farming for generations now, and we even have a phrase for it: "farming the subsidy". Put simply, this has meant farmers have not been required to be responsible for their own destinies. A huge part of farm income, in some sectors as much as half, has been handed to them regardless, just as long as they shift their output to meet the desire of politicians and not customers. Why should you yarn folk care? Well, in my opinion it has been one of the key reasons for the destruction of the formerly world-leading British wool industry.

The subsidy of sheep farms has not rewarded or supported wool production; at different times, it has paid money for the number of sheep owned, the amount of land farmed, and now things are changing towards environmental work. At the same time as this lack of support for wool has come the government monopoly of the Wool Board. This organisation compelled all commercial wool to be sold to itself; they would then pay farmers a price they set after selling it onwards.

Now, I like free money (subsidies) fine; you offer me free money, and I will take it. But it comes with a price - there is "no such thing as a free lunch". I say that the subsidy of sheep farming has been negligent of its wool-producing roots, and has led to the near total destruction of this former pillar of the British economy.

Back in my Grandfather's time (the early 1950s), top-grade North Country Cheviot wool commanded £60 a kilo in today's money, and wool was the main source of income for many sheep farmers. Wool was bought by commercial buyers with the price being set by quality, and so farmers focused on wool quality. Different breeds and different areas of the country produced wool for many purposes; our Cheviots' wool went to the finest Savile Row worsted suits, other types of wool went to carpets, blankets and clothing and yarn.

The subsidy system broke this link between quality of product and the price received. The Wool Board will protest that fashions changed and the rise of synthetics slashed demand for wool, but the mechanisms in place simply did not support the production of great wool by sheep farmers. The Board will rightly claim they do their best to sell the wool produced by Britain's sheep farmers, but in my opinion the damage was done back in the days when the link between wool and the reason for sheep farming was broken. In 2021, for example, the Wool Board offered something like £0.35-0.39 a kilo for top-grade Cheviot wool.

Today there is a small number of us sheep farmers who seek to reestablish the link between quality wool production and getting a living value for it. 'Living Value' is my own phrase - a mash-up of living wage and market value. It means that the price wool gets is set by customers concerned with quality and provenance - high sheep welfare, environmental responsibility, carbon footprint of production and so on. On the other side, farmers once again are reacting to customer demands and are responding by how they manage their farms' output, putting wool to the fore, and getting paid reasonably for their work. ☺

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*Next Month: Life on the farm is busier than ever as lambing season begins*