



Graeme has been busy repairing the fields and walls, and planting wild flowers

Spring on the farm

Graeme Bethune welcomes the abundance of life at Ballachly Farm as the warmer weather arrives



MAY IS my favourite month. The farm is full of life: lambs running, birds singing, bees the size of Zeppelins droning around, trees bursting into leaf - everywhere life is madly living just

as hard as it can. In May I pay myself with time, taking precious moments to stand and watch, listen and breathe. This is the true reward shepherds get for their insane workload - moments like watching bees dance on flowers, or lambs jumping for joy, really feed the soul.

Work never stops, and even before the girls finish lambing I am up on the tractor repairing the fields. It has been a nasty, wet winter, with a prolonged period of windy and very cold weather. This means a lot of damage to the fields and a very late start to the growing season. This lack of good grazing has had a serious effect on some ewes; their milk has dried up, and thus their lambs are in trouble. If this happens in the first week of life I might replace their mum with bottle milk. This year I have seven bottle-fed lambs. I must admit I enjoy being their parent - the devotion of a lamb is like that of a cat: "Love you!"; "Happy to see you!"; "Feed me!". It's nice to be wanted.

There is so much work to be done on the farm right now. First up is scraping the

remains of the hay feeding stations off the fields - this is spoiled and pooped on, but it makes a great addition to the big compost heaps, where I make soil to be spread onto the fields as soil-improver next year.

The fields get levelled with the heavy roller to flatten frost heave, as rolling helps with seed-to-earth contact for the germination of new grass plants. Then the fields are aggressively tine-harrowed to remove moss and old dead grass. This lets air and light onto the soil to promote new grass growth. I also oversee with new grass and other plants to keep the contents of the fields fresh. This spring I have tried a couple of new things regarding overseeding. I have paid a contractor to overseed new grass using a big fancy machine, and I have hand-spread wild meadow mixes of flowers, herbs and grasses. I want to see which approach produces results. All of this ongoing maintenance, repair and upgrading work is aimed at a better environment and food quality for the sheeps.

For a change of scenery I am repairing three areas of the derelict drystone dyke (drystone wall). I have a passion for this work - wire fences are so ugly; worse, they are only doing one job of keeping sheep in a field. I want more, and a good stone dyke not only keeps sheep in a field, it also gives them shelter from the wind. The stone wall

acts like a heat sink, storing sunlight as heat, and releasing it through the night. This means the strip alongside it has a different micro-climate, and adds variety to the mix of species which make up the fields. The dyke also provides nesting places for birds, insects and wee beasties (one job has halted because a weasel is nesting where I am working). They act as fire-breaks, and they use up the stone which bleeds constantly from my fields.

Sheep love dykes - they provide shelter from the wind and rain, and when it's hot they line up in the shade, which must be a relief when they have a heavy fleece on. Oh, also the material is free, so all it costs is my time and labour - totally worth it, even if building it did not make me happy.

So why am I telling you about tractors and dykes? Well, there's so much work that goes into setting up an environment for happy sheep - lots of stuff I do that directly relates to the health and wellbeing of my girls, but might not be apparent from the outside. I want to explain the breadth of work that goes into high-welfare farming. These jobs improve the greater health of the farm environment. They are part of an upward spiral of effect, helping to restore the traditional balance of life on a True North Sheep Farm. 🐏

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Next Month: Graeme faces up to a big challenge to the health of his flock