

Breeding south suffolks the

Anne Boswell meets south suffolk sheep stud breeders who have chosen to use minimal intervention to ensure the best animals come through.

In an age where carefully selected genetics are used to create an exceptional breeding animal, there are still stud breeders who are doing it as nature intended.

Ian and Georgina Lawrence of Braewood South Suffolk Stud at Nukuhou North, between Waimana and Opotiki, have been breeding south suffolk sheep since 1977 and say they have chosen to use minimal intervention to ensure their stud animals are the best of the best.

Their personal breeding philosophy is much the same as any other good sheep breeder – wanting to provide a virile ram with good feet, legs and constitution, and progeny with high growth rates and good carcass quality – but the Lawrences have chosen to take it one step further and trust in the process of natural selection to ensure the hardiest sheep come through.

With almost 40 years of south suffolk breeding behind them, they have scaled down some parts of their operation but are very much still heavily invested – financially and emotionally – in the 175 registered south suffolk ewes and 25 formerly registered polled dorset ewes on farm.

"We had around 1500 Romney ewes but all the commercial sheep are gone now due to a combination of financial reasons and workload," Lawrence says. "We also knew that intensifying the operation would be easier using two-wire electric fences."

"We are also phasing back the polled dorset now and focusing on the south suffolks, which is a reflection of the market, really, as sheep have gone more into the hill country and farmers are requiring the colour markings of the south suffolk."

Despite being raised on a dairy farm at Otamarakau, he always had the intention of becoming a drystock farmer. He studied a Bachelor of Ag Commerce at Lincoln and fulfilled his dream of becoming a practical farmer, buying a farm in partnership with his parents in 1978.

Wife Georgina was brought up on a drystock and dairy farm in Tauranga, and latterly Rotoehu forest, and trained as a midwife and nurse before becoming a Plunket nurse for the Whakatane district.

Within five years of buying the drystock farm, the couple had bought out his parents and were well on their way to becoming successful drystock farmers.

"The farm was originally 246ha with 2800 stock units, and today it is 310ha wintering 4000 stock units on an all-grass system," Lawrence says.

"In addition to the stud sheep, we also winter 450 dairy heifer grazers. We take the heifers on at eight months old and farm them through for one year. We also winter another 175 R2 fattening cattle, and additionally buy 200 two-year-old cattle annually in the spring for short term fattening."

The couple have also recently ended a 30-year relationship with deer, having wintered 200 breeding hinds and fattened all the

progeny as yearlings since 1984.

"We were at a stage where we were going to have to look at doing a lot of fencing renewal, and we found we could generate as good a return with simpler systems with the cattle," Lawrence says. "And I was getting older and the deer weren't."

With such a variety of livestock on farm, it's no wonder they have broken with previous practice and employed a part-time worker in the last 12 months.

Lawrence's interest in south suffolk sheep began well before he bought the farm. He worked on a southdown stud in Canterbury in 1974 and the advice of his former employer stayed with him.

"That chap said to me that if he was getting started, he would get into south suffolks, and that really stuck in my mind," he says.

"I actually started the south suffolk flock in 1977: the first ones were liberated on my father's dairy farm. When my parents retired they started the polled dorset flock, and we combined the two flocks under Lawrence Partners. Today, our two children are the partners of Lawrence Partners, replacing my parents."

He says the breeding of the south suffolk sheep was always of interest to him.

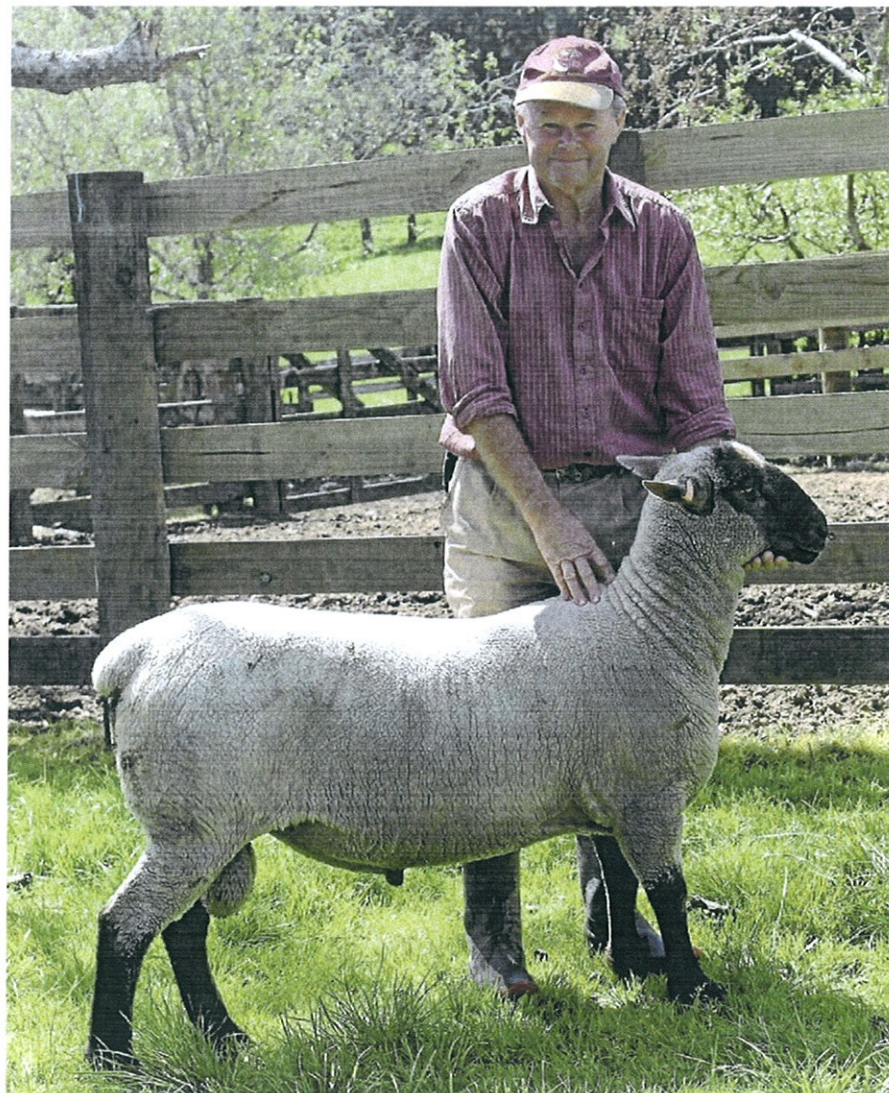
The breed is a cross between a suffolk and a southdown sheep, and was developed in Canterbury by southdown stud breeder George Gould.

Gould wanted a specialist breed to meet the requirements of a price schedule for prime lamb cuts which carried penalties for too much fat, so the quick maturity and carcass shape of the southdown and high flesh-to-fat ratio of the suffolk were incorporated and the breed was registered in 1955.

The south suffolk is increasingly being used as a terminal sire for prime lamb production, and its high yielding carcass makes it ideal for further processing.

"The sheep reflect some of the things Gould wanted, which was the frame – they are good size sheep – but with the meat quality introduced by the southdown," Lawrence says.

"We find them to be really pretty resilient. They are an intelligent sheep than can achieve



Ian Lawrence with a south suffolk ram hogget. They produce intelligent lambs that grow to processing weights at a young age.

processing quality at a relatively young age but can also be grown on to heavy weights without grading.

"Our personal breeding philosophy is to try and provide a ram that can get a large number of ewes in lamb in a short period of time, and do it for a number of years. To do that it has to have sound feet and legs, good constitution. We also blood test our

potential sires for footrot resistance.

"Secondly, we need those lambs to survive. So we do minimal assistance at lambing to ensure only the hardier sheep come through.

"We have them on easy land so we can identify and record the lambs at birth, then after docking they move up onto steep hill country to test their constitution.

"We're looking for high growth rates because firstly, the most profitable lamb is one that you can draft off its mother, and secondly, given that we're in the northern half of the North Island you need lambs that can be sent to the works before the eczema season.

"Finally, we are looking for carcass quality."

Also adding to the south suffolk's popularity is the easily identifiable markings on the progeny.

"The fact that they're dark-faced means their progeny is dark-coloured or marked, which is a real benefit to commercial farmers," Lawrence says. "The biggest thing is for commercial farmers using them over maternal flocks – they can identify that the progeny is not by their wool-breed rams."

Braewood stud rams are selected and sold to clients around the North Island, from Cape Runaway in the east to North Auckland, Rotorua and as far south as Wairarapa. Some clients have been with them for 30 years.

"We are based in a largely non-sheep-farming area so the rams go a little further afield," Lawrence says. "The Bay of Plenty is a really challenging environment to



Braewood ram hoggets will be entered in the Walkato A & P Show next week.

way nature intended

breed sheep in. High rainfall and more humid conditions means there is greater exposure to lots of bugs – including facial eczema and zearalenone, which causes temporary infertility.

“Also with the higher rainfall you get higher incidences of pleurisy, and various micro-nutrient deficiencies through leaching. We can give them mineral supplementation and try to address it with our fertiliser applications, but sometimes it’s really hard to identify what the cause of the problems is.”

He says as part of the stud’s breeding resilience philosophy, they haven’t drenched mixed-age ewes for 13 years.

The Lawrences have developed intensive grazing systems, with a large part of the farm now subdivided into 0.8ha paddocks with two-wire electrics and reticulated water.

“The reason behind using an all-grass system is a combination of trying to utilise feed when it is there, while minimising winter damage from feeding out and reducing labour input,” he says.

In the last couple of years lambing percentage has been down, due to facial eczema and, they think, zearalenone, causing a high dry rate.

“We do minimal protection for facial eczema to try and breed for tolerance, but it’s really hard to

specifically breed for FE tolerance because the reality is we’d almost have to become a closed flock, and we wouldn’t be able to make gains in other areas,” he says.

“We decided we would try and breed for fast growth rates for the commercial farmers to get the animals to the works before they get too much exposure to eczema, rather than having highly FE-tolerant animals that may be slower growing.”

He says the flock is registered on SIL with growth rates recorded at weaning and 200 days. At 200 days they also do eye muscle scanning of ram lambs.

“Our sheep are pretty big-framed, even for south suffolk,” he says. “We’ve got one client who uses our rams for hogget mating who has had all sorts of trouble with hogget mating until he started using our rams. And I think that is a reflection of us not interfering too much.”

“Quite clearly, sheep farming is going to be restricted to hill country where it’s pretty hard to do intensive lambing, so they have to have natural ability to lamb on their own and survive.”

He is involved with the breed off the farm, too. He first went on the south suffolk sheep breed committee in 1988 and just finished his involvement this year, serving two terms as chairman in that time.

“It was really interesting. As much as we enjoy the challenge of breeding sheep it’s also about meeting all those people from around New Zealand,” he says. “It’s been really rewarding making so many contacts.”

He is also a judge and breed inspector, having judged at the Royal Show in Canterbury and regularly judging south suffolk and polled dorset sheep at A & P shows around the country.

“A & P shows aren’t the commercial window that they used to be,” he says.

“I view it more as a sport between breeders but again, it’s an opportunity to get together with people with a similar interest. We always treated it as a family outing when the kids were little.”

The Lawrences themselves don’t show much – but they are showing three ram hoggets and two ewe hoggets at the Waikato Show next week.

The have been successful in the past, having placed second and fourth with ram hoggets at the Royal Show in Hawke’s Bay last year.

The couple are considering their future retirement, and although they are unsure of what that will look like, they know they want to continue their involvement with land, and with the south suffolk breed.



Ian and Georgina Lawrence want to continue their involvement with south suffolks in retirement.

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