

Hybu Cig Cymru

Scholarship

Tony Davies

Report of Travel to Norway 2008



Tony Davies
HCC Livestock Scholar 2008

Introduction

I farm with my wife Angela at Henfron farm in the Elan Valley, Mid Wales. We have 4 children in schools at Rhayader and Llandrindod Wells.

Our sheep farm is 1700 acres of mainly unfenced moorland rising to 1700 feet. We also have a business, direct selling Organic Mutton from our own farm.

I applied for a HCC scholarship to see if the often negative attitude against mutton in the UK compared to other red meats exists in other countries.

After a successful application and interview I chose Norway as my destination for the following reasons;

- Norway has a thriving sheep industry, which focuses on home consumption with very little lamb or mutton imported or exported.
- Initial research showed that Norwegians did knowingly eat mutton – calling it mutton and not lamb, as is the case for the majority of mutton consumed in the UK.

I departed for Norway on the 24th September and spent 3 weeks travelling around the southern part of Norway covering 2500 miles.

As well as visiting several farms, I attended food festivals, a country fair, the World Sheep Shearing Championship, small farmer/butchers, The Norwegian Organic research institute and lots of other retailers and butchers that sold mutton.

‘Animalia’ which is a government meat research institute were very helpful in providing me with the establishments that were happy to have me as a visitor. I also had help from the Norwegian Farmers Union and the Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture.

My lack of knowledge of the Norwegian language was a slight problem and even though everyone in the tourism industry spoke good English the farmers in the mountains spoke less.

Everywhere I went I was treated with kindness and found the people of Norway to be very hospitable and friendly.

Country

Norway is a north to south Scandinavian mountain range, stretching 1640 miles from north to south with a population of only 4.6 million. The coastline is fragmented with thousands of islands and fjords penetrate deep into the mountain range.

Due to the extensive mountain and wilderness three quarters of the population live along the coast.

Norway has only been independent since 1905, following years of rule by Denmark and Sweden. The Norwegians are fiercely nationalistic and value their country's independence very highly.

The Norwegian population has voted against joining the EU.

Route of Travel



Commencing at the port of Larvic I travelled to the central town of Geilo, then down to Ergesund before taking the costal route up to Molde before travelling inland across the high mountain range to Oslo.

Agriculture

Norway is approximately 50% self sufficient in food and is 95% self sufficient in meat.

The national agricultural policy has and still is supporting agriculture through production, environmental and area payments. The level of support is second highest in the world after Switzerland.

Neither Norway nor Switzerland is a member of the EU. Support levels in Norway are measured in percentage of total production value “PSE” (producer subsidy estimate).

Comparison of support levels in other countries

Switzerland	74%
Norway	73%
Iceland	69%
Japan	57%
EU	35%
USA	19%
New Zealand	2%

2006 Figures

Headage Payments are paid on a winter count (January 1st) with flocks of up to 100 ewes receiving payments of up to £50 per breeding ewe. For flocks above 100, the ewe payments are cut to approx £10 per breeding ewe.

To promote carcass improvement government support is paid on carcass grades E, U, R and O. An area payment of approx £160/ha, subject to cross compliance, is paid plus £40/ha extra for LFA areas.

The cost of living is very high in Norway with VAT at 25% and tax rates starting at 28%.

3% of land is under agricultural cultivation equating to 1.03 million ha with approximately half of this as grassland. Soil conditions are poor

but due to the Gulf Stream the climate is wet and relatively warm and so is ideally suited for the production of grass.

The growing season (>5 degrees Celsius) is 160 days in the South and 110 days in the North. Which is short compared with the UK (which has a minimum 200 days). Winters are very hard with 4 months under a blanket of snow with the exception of low coastal areas, which have very high rainfall.

Farms over 10 ha cannot be sold to anybody except descendants or somebody involved with agriculture. Under the allodial rights system a prospective purchaser has to apply to a board for permission to purchase. This was only recently raised for farms from 2 ha to 10 ha but already there has been an increase in hobby farming.

Farm sizes are measured in hectares and decares (which are ¼ acre).

Open Access

In 1957 a recreational act gave the public “right to roam” on all areas during the winter, only restricting access on cultivated and fenced areas between 30th April and 15th September.

Camping is allowed anywhere except under 150 metres from a house or occupied cabin. Any one can pick berries, wild flowers, mushrooms and roots of wild herbs for personal use.

On the occasions when I was walking in the countryside the farmers I met greeted me very warmly.



Sheep Farming

There are 50,000 farm holdings and approximately 15,000 of these keep sheep.

The number of sheep farms has more than halved in the last 20 years whilst the total number of sheep has stayed the same. The total number of breeding ewes is around 1 million. Average flock size is 67 breeding ewes.

Three quarters of sheep are based on the Norwegian White Sheep. The Norwegian speal sheep (spaelsau) a native shorttailed breed now account for only 1.5%.

Farm sizes average 15 ha but most use Summer Mountain grazing rights or rent land off large landowners who use it for the hunting and shooting rights.

Very large areas of mountain are available for sheep farmers to graze in the summer with some of the farmers I visited using approximately 1000 ha on which only 100 ewes and 200 lambs grazed. The mountain areas are clear of snow by beginning of May and some farms with small acreages would put ewes and lambs on to the mountain straight out of the lambing shed.

The Norwegian white sheep stay in flocks on the mountain in the summer and move around grazing areas without splitting up. Every ewe has a bell put around its neck to make it easier for the farmers to gather and shepherd the sheep. When these sheep are crossed with other breeds they lose their herding instincts.

Most sheep are slaughtered in September, October and November. All ewes and lambs are shorn before slaughter because of the very high hygiene standards.

Historically sheep numbers in the winter depended on the amount of hay that could be made in the normal damp summers to feed the sheep through the long winters. The invention of big bale silage has made keeping stock a lot easier and now flock sizes are normally based on the size of shed for winter housing.



Busy catching lambs for tailing

Traditional wooden farm buildings with cattle and sheep on the ground floor and fodder kept above have mostly been converted to sheep only sheds by replacing upper floors with slats so expensive straw is not needed. Sheds are used to finish fattening the last lambs in the late autumn followed by housing the ewes by January.

Replacement ewes are always bred on farm with rams being the only stock moving between farms. Ewes are kept until health reasons required their culling normally between 7 and 10 years.

Almost all farms I visited participated in breed improvement schemes similar to ours in Wales. One of the biggest farms had 150 ewes and

sold over 250 lambs every year, which averaged over 20kg deadweight. Best prices were paid on 18-24 kg lambs; grade E3L (approx £4.50kg deadweight).

All the farms I visited used the mountain for summer grazing, the luckier ones having adjoining grazing so no transport was needed. One had its mountain grazing eighty miles away which they had rented from the same large landowner for decades. In 2008 the sheep were late going up the mountains because snow did not clear until late May.

The first lambs are drawn from the ewes when the sheep are gathered from the mountain in September. Very impressive growth rates are achieved on the mountain with 40 kg twin lambs going straight to the abattoir. This is probably achieved because of the very extensive grazing.

Footrot

The week prior to my visit footrot was confirmed in sheep in the county of Rogaland, southwest Norway. This was the first confirmed case for 60 years, the ministry of Agriculture were taking it very seriously and advising farmers to avoid visiting each other's farms.

I did experience difficulties, as a visiting farmer from the UK (famous in Norway for a variety of sheep diseases). I followed the recommended bio-security and carried a bucket, brush and disinfectant with me at each farm, this was appreciated by the farmers that I did visit.

The ministry vets are intending to inspect every one of the 250,000 sheep in the area trying to eradicate the foot rot.

Predators

Foxes are a big problem but are usually shot very quickly as most farmers are excellent shots, shooting being a popular hobby amongst

rural dwellers, with moose, elk and reindeer being the most common targets.

Bears, wolves and big cats are all present in the mountain and they have been protected by law since the seventies. They can be a problem during the summer in some areas. When a rogue wolf is present sheep are quickly gathered off the mountain as wolves have been known to kill dozens of sheep in just a couple of weeks. Except in exceptional circumstances, it is illegal to kill wolves and therefore a compensation scheme is in place for sheep that have been killed by wolves.

Farmers talked highly of this scheme however I found it difficult to acquire figures for the actual compensation payments. Official figures state that in 2004 8,892 sheep were claimed for and an average payment of approx £168 was made.

Diversification

Almost every farmer I met had a secondary income, the most common being selling firewood which is still used by almost every house I saw in Norway. Many farmers also owned or worked in the forestry contracting business. Almost every farmyard had a snowplough or snow blower parked up and many farmers were employed by councils to clear the roads after the huge snowfalls during the winter.

I visited many farmers who had diversified into selling their own meat direct to the public. The main thing they had in common was increasing the value of each carcass by adding as much value as possible by making salami, fenelar (cured leg of mutton), pinnekgot (cured and steamed mutton ribs).

Co-operatives

50,000 farmers own agricultural co-operatives and as an entity under the Federation of Norwegian Agricultural Co-operatives are the fourth largest business in Norway. Total sales amount to £5000 million employing over 20,000 people.

The most well known agricultural co-operatives brands are TINE (milk), GILDE (meat) and PRIOR (egg and poultry). The companies are market leaders in their respective branches.

Nortura (Gilde) is a farmer owned cooperative with 6,800 employees and owned by over 30,000 farmers. All sheep are picked up from farms and taken direct to abattoirs and meat is sold under the brand Gilde. Nortura have an advisory service for farmers, which includes breed improvement schemes and shed building and design. They also support electronic identification by subsidising the tags which now currently cost farmers less than normal tags.

The milk co-operative processes and distributes milk and dairy products, using the country's best-known brand name, TINE. The dairy co-operative is owned by 19,000 milk producers and employs 5,400 workers

PRIOR (the main poultry co-operative processing and marketing eggs and poultry meat) is owned by 1,400 farmers and employs 1,400 people in the main organization.

A potato co-operative that processes and markets potatoes and potato products, using the brand name, HOFF.

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These four co-ops have formed a joint company called Fjordland, which is supplying the supermarkets with processed and ready meals.

Lamb and Mutton

Four supermarket chains sell 99% of all retail sales of lamb and mutton. Except for stew and casserole type dishes, meat consumption is mainly of cured or ready cooked products.

Food tourism is big business with tourist souvenir shops all selling ranges of cured mutton, reindeer, moose and elk. These cured products are very popular as souvenirs and gifts because they do not need refrigeration and have at least a three-month shelf life.



Mutton

Traditionally meat was salted, cured, dried or smoked as a means of preservation and eating mutton is considered a very Norwegian tradition. The traditional Christmas dinner is Pinnekjot and is as popular as turkey is in the UK. Pinnekjot are ribs of mutton are salted and dried for several weeks then steamed as a method of cooking. Large meat companies steam the ribs which can then be quickly cooked in the home.

I was lucky enough to eat this on three occasions and it was very tasty and tender I can heartily recommend it!



Pinnekjot drying

Fenelar is a leg of mutton cured for several weeks and sold in all the supermarkets. This is a premium product and sells for over £30 kg on the bone. It is also sold sliced in 100 gm packs for approx £5.50 (£55 per kg).



Leg of Fenelar

A Norwegian mutton stew, not unlike a Welsh Cawl, is a very traditional supper dish.

Mutton and lamb are still seasonal products readily available when I was in Norway but I was told the raw meat was harder to obtain in the summer. The meat counter in any supermarket consists mainly of cured meats with a smaller section of raw meat. The raw meat cuts available consisted of Legs on the bone and trays of diced ready for stewing.

My conclusion

Highly nationalistic as a nation, the Norwegians seem to have a very clear understanding of food provenance and they consider everything home grown to be of a far higher quality than anything imported. They hold food producers, the farmers, in very high regard.

In return the farmers understand their role as food providers. All the farmers I met took their responsibility for producing high quality food very seriously and they took great pride in their work, stock and farms. They appreciate the high regard in which they are held by the general public and understand that these people are the customers.

There is a clearer understanding of the role and need for each other creating a much closer link between the producer and consumer.

The majority of meat eaten throughout the year is eaten as cured products, Fenelar and Pinnokjet being the most popular. Traditionally they were made from mutton but are now often made from a mix of lamb and mutton. Fresh meat is less popular and is still very much a seasonal product with the new season considered as something to look forward to and a huge demand is created for the home grown product. There is no prejudice against mutton which is as popular as lamb if not more so.

I think the dominance of supermarkets in Norway is probably the future in UK retailing but the Norwegian farmers have the advantage of owning the large co-operatives which supply the retailers.

My travel experience was invaluable for broadening my horizons as well as giving me confidence to expand my own small meat business.

All the above information I gathered from the very helpful people in Norway and if there are any errors I apologize for my lack of accurate reporting skills.

All monetary values are based on the exchange rate at the time of my visit.