

## Successful lamb production on the shores of Lough Foyle



SITUATED quite literally a stone's throw from the shores of Lough Foyle, Patrick McNicholl has learned from experience the many dos and don'ts of sheep farming. The Greysteel farmer has run a commercial flock of 200 plus ewes alongside a small vegetable growing enterprise for more years than he perhaps cares to remember. Efficiency, high stocking rates and maximising profit have been the key drivers in the production of first quality lambs for an increasingly demanding market place. To achieve his targets Patrick has put his faith in the Suffolk breed – and it's a decision he has never regretted for one minute. The most recent example of this occurred no further away than 12 months ago when Patrick purchased the champion ram lamb at the NI Branch Premier Show and Sale in Ballymena Livestock Mart. The lamb was a Strathisla Stoner son and boasted some of the best genetics within the breed. Those supreme breeding lines have already reaped handsome reward for Patrick, who returned to Ballymena in early spring to win the Suffolk section of the annual spring lamb competition.

Patrick's 12-week-old lambs weighed in at 22kg and were the talk of the town after the auctioneer's hammer fell at a staggering £140. “That particular spring lamb sale in Ballymena attracts many of the top butchers and if they are buying your lambs it's a fair assumption that you must be doing something right,” said Patrick. “In my book buying a well bred ram is money well spent, an investment for the future. You have to have the breeding and certainly I have had powerful lambs out of the ram I bought last year. “He has all the characteristics that the Suffolk has built its reputation on over many years.

“The Suffolk has served me tremendously well. Other breeds just don't measure up when it comes to size, growth rate and early maturity compared to the Suffolk. I have dabbled with a few other breeds in my time and it's been my experience that a pen of Suffolk lambs ready for market will be a kilo or a kilo

and half heavier than the other leading breeds.” Mr McNicholl has traditionally lambed down a percentage of his flock in December and January with the aim of maximising price at the Easter market with the remainder lambing in late spring. He aims to graze five ewes to the acre all year round and in late autumn will put lambs, including bought in stores, on to turnips for finishing. Patrick's sheep enterprise encompasses the full spectre of lamb production. It's a year round business and the Suffolk gives him the flexibility, versatility and adaptability to run a successful unit.

Most of his early lambing ewes are Suffolk X while many of the late lambers are the traditional crossbred (Border Leicester /Blackface). In both situations the Suffolk ticks all the right boxes for Patrick.

“There is no question that the Suffolk is well suited to the early lambing system. It's something I have always worked at and already this year I have marketed over a 100 lambs. “The Suffolk is also ideal for the Crossbred ewe, this year has been an exceptional year for me in terms of lamb numbers. Eighty three of those Crossbred ewes scanned with 186 lambs and I kept the most of them living. So in that respect I was well pleased. “And while value for money sometimes dictates what type of store lamb I would purchase later in the year I'll still lean towards the Suffolk, mainly because I know they'll perform. The problem is that those well bred Suffolk stores tend to command a premium price for the seller and as a consequence that doesn't make them any easier bought. “I'm not in the business of telling people what or what not to do. Everyone's situation is different. That said, I know what has worked best for me and over the years the Suffolk has served me extremely well.”