



**When should animals be housed indoors – and how? All smallholders face this question. Jack Smellie and David Chidgey explain how they manage on one acre**

**Sheep brought inside during bad winter weather at Jules Moore's smallholding in Gloucestershire**

**N**o matter what size the smallholding/farm, the presence of indoor animal housing on the land is an 'essential' and, on our one-acre plot, the very first thing we addressed when we moved here five years ago was removing the dilapidated stables we had inherited! In their place we built a 14m x 10m barn which included several sets of stable doors, a milking parlour and store, a mezzanine storage area, water taps and electric points on all four sides and a high, light roof. One thing our 'livestock expert' builders did not get quite right, however, was the ventilation – more on that later...

#### **FROM COLD, DRY AND SNOWY TO HIDEOUSLY WET**

Our first two winters here were cold, dry

and snowy – we were actually snowed in for over a week at one point and then, after managing to get out to replenish the feed stores, we were snowed in again for another eight days! For the most part the barn remained wonderfully empty throughout both these cold winters and we have happy memories of feeding carrots to the goats in the snow and clearing paths for the poultry. Our land remained flood-free and colds, sniffles and coughs all kept their distance.

However, the last three winters have been hideously wet, and so the barn has now been adapted so that the sheep and goats can come indoors if needs be and so be housed 24/7. One end of the barn becomes the 'winter' poultry area with access to the outside via a pop-hole. We never keep the poultry in – they make their own choices – but we do rest their summer paddock. The

alpacas have to stay with the poultry outside but there is also a separate stall for them at night! At times the barn is busy and cosy and we often joke that all we need is a human baby and we'd be all set up for a nativity!

#### **THE FIVE FREEDOMS OF ANIMAL WELFARE**

Running the stock we do on just one acre (see our article in the November issue) is challenging and we are ever mindful of the five freedoms of animal welfare according to Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) and the RSPCA: freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, injury or disease; freedom to express normal behaviour; and finally, freedom from fear and distress. When we then house our animals indoors over the winter, these become even more of a consideration.



**Alpacas are also given shelter on Jack's smallholding in Cornwall**



**Sheep feeding inside at Jack's smallholding**



**Jack's goat stalls**

### THE REASONS FOR HOUSING STOCK INDOORS OVER THE WINTER ARE FOURFOLD:

firstly food is limited (i.e. grass/browsing); secondly, there may be a serious risk of poaching the ground; thirdly, resting the land is a good idea and fourthly, there could well be health/safety issues with regard to how you access the land if you continue to keep stock outside. Carrying large amounts of forage across dark, muddy paddocks has nothing to recommend it. And, of course, it is not particularly good for cloven-hoofed livestock in particular to be standing (slipping) around in mud...

Our land now gets very wet, and so our first concern is always preserving the grass and reducing poaching. Our gate mats keep things under control for a while, but there comes a time, usually November (depending

on how much rain we have had by then), when the bottom half of the smallholding becomes unusable.

The decision to have your animals indoors 24/7 impacts on both one's time and wallet. More food and bedding will be required, more mucking out will need to be done and, even though goats need hay all year round, we get through an awful lot more in the winter when they cannot eat the grass/browse in their paddock. The animals may well drink more too, as hay is very dry and provides none of the moisture of grass, and so water buckets/troughs may need topping up/checking more frequently as well.

### SO HOW DO WE TRY TO MAKE IT WORK?

To begin with we have the indoor stalls set up so that there is still access to the outside in the form of hardstanding. This gives the

animals the chance to be in the fresh air when the weather allows, as well as giving them a slight change of scene and so alleviate boredom. If the weather permits, we feed outside as well. We are very generous with bedding – we take the worst of the poo out every day and then top up with fresh straw. We use Miscanthus or Equinola under the straw which provides a warm, odour-free base and despite copious amounts of wee, it can (depending on how thick a layer is put down) last a good two to three weeks. And when we do need a bit more of a clear out we have really good access out of the barn, through our polytunnel and straight into our compost heap area. This makes OUR lives easy and safe.

We raise the water troughs as high as we can in order to discourage the animals pooing into them and we put salt/mineral licks at head (ish) heights so they don't get covered in mucky footprints.

### BE MINDFUL OF NATURAL PECKING ORDERS

Feeding your animal indoors can be tricky due to the natural pecking orders that exist in any group of stock, (goats have a very defined order which is difficult, if not impossible to change), and we have to take huge care to ensure everyone is getting their fair share. We feed the pygmy goats communally, but there are always enough feeding trugs such that no more than two animals ever need share, and the trugs are well spaced out. The dairy goats have individual buckets which we hook the 'other' side of the hurdles that make up two sides of their stall. They have to stick their heads through to get to them – once their head is in the bucket they don't usually look up (or even breathe!) until every scrap is gone, but we have a new addition this year in the form of sliding bars that keep their heads in place until we release them (a bit like when they are on the milking bench). This stops any arguing at the end when there is a tendency for a manic checking of all the feeding buckets in case there are any bits left – usually accompanied with a few head butts...

Hay is always given ad lib and, again, we make sure there are enough racks so that all animals can feed at once without having to fight for space or live in fear of being pushed out of the way. Having racks between stalls means both sides can be used, and so the goats share with the alpacas and the pygmy goats with the sheep. We also put lids on the racks to avoid wastage and we also 'rotate' the hay: basically, we keep the racks as full as we can, but we don't just top up (and so



*The decision to have your animals indoors 24/7 impacts on both one's time and wallet.*



A view into Jack's pygmy goat stall

have old stale bits always left at the bottom), we pull out the remaining hay and put it back on top or even in another rack.

#### **A FULL BARN IN THE WINTER IS A LITTLE LIKE A CLASSROOM DURING 'WET PLAY'**

All the above takes care of the basic requirements of feed and water and of shelter (freedoms one and two), but of course a full barn in the winter is a little like a classroom during 'wet play' where several occupants may be getting a little bored and restless and where little Johnny (or Joanna) in the corner has really started to sneeze. With freedom number three in mind, it is crucial to be aware that the risk of pneumonia-type illnesses rises as soon as you have a lot of animals in a confined space, and especially if ventilation is not great. Stable doors are perfect because they keep the first 3ft of the barn draught-free, but our main barn doors open up into the prevailing wind which is not great (although we can safely open them a little way to allow in fresh air but not the rain). Ideally, though, we should have had Yorkshire boarding or similar on two of the four sides of our barn and a much bigger gap under the roof... failing that we try to keep the barn as dust-free as we can (we do actually Hoover it in the autumn) and we get the best quality (dust-free) hay and straw possible. It is crucial to remember that the animals are NOT in the barn to keep warm – they are there to keep dry and to preserve the land – so it's all about creating an environment that is draught-free but VERY well ventilated.

We keep a really close eye on the animals for any signs of sniffles, and this involves listening as well as looking – a late night walk down to the barn when many of them are asleep is great as you can really hear the individual breathing and spot any early signs. It is also important to check the stalls for anything that may harm the stock: bailer twine in the bedding, bits of wire or nails... Goats in particular love to rub themselves against fencing, hurdles and walls and even a small screw head or similar left sticking up can cause a nasty wound.

#### **LIVESTOCK CAN GET BORED**

Finally, there is a balance to be had between thinking how mad we as humans might get being stuck in a barn day in, day out, AND realising that animals may not need quite the stimulation we do, but that they CAN get bored. Freedom numbers four and five require the animals to be able to express normal behaviour and be free from fear and distress. Goats and sheep (and alpacas) spend a lot of time eating and chewing the



**Enjoying a mineral lick**

cud, and there is nothing quite so lovely as walking into the barn and seeing and hearing munching, chewing and yes, even at times, belching! If that is a frequent sight, then things are good. Even better is to be able to bring in browsing for them all. We planted masses of willow in our first year here and so each winter we are able to provide willow branches two or three times a week for a good two to three months, stuffing the branches high in the hay racks.

Animals do appreciate their routines, so

stress/distress can definitely be avoided by trying to keep the routines of feeding, mucking out, giving treats, etc as regular as possible. We feed in the same order each day (this helps us too) and we respect pecking orders. If the outside elements allow, time out on the hard standing is always a good diversion for an hour or so. The polytunnel can be a lifesaver in the winter as beds get emptied of old brassicas and the like, and these go down a storm with both the sheep and goats.

If the weather turns cold and the ground gets hard, we do use the middle paddock that runs down from the barn as a bit of a 'sacrifice' paddock – it is not really a grazing area but more of a 'gallop' down to the main paddocks and so can stand a bit more wear and tear. When it was created we put down a roll of reinforcement mesh which gradually became grown over – this does mean that the ground here does not get quite as muddy as elsewhere (if we are careful).

### **WE ACTUALLY ENJOY HAVING THE ANIMAL INDOORS IN THE WINTER.**

It's a lovely time to really make sure all the nannies and ewes are fit and healthy, any kids that have been kept are coping well with their first winter, and we are often still milking a goat or two: an excuse for Classic



**Enjoying greens from the polytunnel**

FM or Planet Rock to fill the milking parlour – something we are sure that all the animals enjoy!

### **MORE:**

**Jack Smellie and David Chidgey**

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**Jules Moore:**

[www.mumbleysfarmhouse.co.uk](http://www.mumbleysfarmhouse.co.uk)

**Debbie Kingsley:**

[farm@southyeofarmwest.co.uk](mailto:farm@southyeofarmwest.co.uk)

## How other smallholders do it

Jack asked Debbie Kingsley (South Yeo Farm West, Devon) and Jules Moore (Mumbleys Farmhouse, Gloucestershire) for their thoughts and any additional ideas on how best to manage winter housing. *Jack's comments are in italics.*

**Jules Moore:** 'Horse lovers use rubber mats in their stables and we have found that foam mats are a good alternative with our goats (and great insulation too). Mucking out is so much easier. It is never advised to keep sheep in for any longer than possible, as they are particularly prone to diseases when inside, so I would advise them to be kept out for as long as possible and then very well ventilated'. *(This is a very good point; the same can apply to alpacas as, with their heavy coats, both sets of animals really can overheat.)* 'The last two winters have been particularly bad and we have had six goats, 20 sheep and three cows all occupying bits of the only really dry (1/2 acre) paddock we have before now. We have even had sheep on the lawn when grass was in short supply, so we know all about making do!' *(The importance of the sacrifice paddock cannot be under-estimated.)* 'We also use Miscanthus instead of shavings for our poultry as it breaks down in compost far quicker, which is important in so

small a space.' *(Yes, we switched three years ago and our heaps are much better off for it.)*

**Debbie Kingsley:** 'Overwintering some or all livestock inside can be a necessity in some parts of the country. There are a couple of additional things I would suggest: firstly, installing automatic drinkers can save time spent topping up buckets and troughs and would stop animals kicking them over too. These provide constant water in all but below freezing temperatures. We pile well rotted muck on any external exposed pipes which keeps things flowing freely.' *(We learnt the hard way in our first year about water containers being kicked over and any that need to be ground level or just above have wooden frames around them to stop this. We considered automatic drinkers but feel happier topping up buckets as this way we feel we*

*can monitor the animals' water intake – with our small numbers, filling up buckets is not too arduous, BUT for larger animals/ numbers would definitely consider!)*

*'It's hard financially and mentally to adapt an almost new building, but knowing that the animals have to be housed every winter I would definitely recommend replacing the top half of the solid walls with Yorkshire board and create a gap between the board and the solid wall to allow fresh air to enter. I would also create an outlet gap along the apex of the roof to allow moist, stale air to escape from the barn, perhaps using roof ridge vents if preferred to an open gap. This would make the barn more pleasant and healthier over long winters for people and livestock.' (Next year's plan maybe?)*

