

# Raising the Baa, Chippenham

**I**T WAS a chance conversation with a business colleague that changed the life of Wiltshire shepherd Chris Farnsworth. A man who was used to working with thousands of sheep every year – and who still does – he has always known that his work can be seasonal and can dry up overnight if bad things happen in farming. Think Foot and Mouth, for example. But thanks to his entrepreneurial instinct, he has now turned his shepherding skills into a growing enterprise for training, team-building and leadership challenges – Raising The Baa.

It was just over three years ago as he talked to friend David Wreathall about the latter's new youth charity Inner Flame, that an idea took hold. David was talking about engaging and inspiring young people. Chris told him to get "them out and running around the farm". The problem for Chris came when his throwaway comment was met with: "Ok, what shall we do with them?"

Quickly, Chris designed a series of challenges for teenagers to get them to work with a small flock of sheep. How long would it take them to herd them into a pen? Or drive them round a given point and back into a pen? Or safely get a sheep on the ground? A *One Man And His Dog* challenge where you are the dog...

Although born and bred in London, Chris knew from an early age that the outdoor life was for him. He has travelled the world, worked in various roles on farms and quickly came to realise that working with animals was what he wanted to do, working with sheep in particular.

"Sheep are challenging to work with. Contrary to popular opinion, no two are the same. And, as mattered at the time, they are cheap enough to invest in. I became a contract shepherd working all over the country on farms doing lambing, shearing and often, wintering thousands of sheep in Wiltshire, for farmers around the UK, particularly from Wales."



Since that early encounter over coffee, Chris began to see that herding sheep is a useful and interesting way of teaching life skills. The unusual nature of the business means that it has also attracted publicity for him, including appearing on BBC's *The One Show*.

"This venture has attracted the imagination of the media, which is a good thing. But what we are doing has brought real benefits for companies, charities and individuals, who get a unique opportunity to assess their communications skills, their teams and their ability to listen to others."

Organisations which have worked with Raising the Baa have included Inner Flame but also IKEA, a company which frequently uses the experience to help teams bond and to spot leadership talent. The Prince's Trust has also been a client as well as Tyco Electronics,

which recently sent a team of 30 as a reward for completing a major piece of work.

"Tyco's team was clearly a team which worked well together. They tackled the challenges in a way which surprised even us, but it worked. For this organisation, the event reinforced what they had already guessed – that this team of workers were at the top of their game."

For other teams, the exercises can bring out problems. Using 'sheep cam', a light-weight camera on one of the sheep's heads, team members can see the exercise from the animal's point of view.

"If a team is having a problem or just not working well together, we often find a trainer or facilitator will come along. They will then take the film back to the office for private discussions about what worked and, often as important, what did not. Feedback has shown us that seeing teamwork from this very different perspective helps people to change their behaviour, if it needs to change."

"Almost everyone will be outside of their comfort zone with this challenge. But what happens in the office will also happen when working with the sheep; I would say within 20 minutes it's easy to spot the dynamics of a team."

Attending a course means going through a series of exercises herding the sheep, where each task gets harder and harder. The first is simply to get the sheep in a pen and close the gate using any strategy at all.

Surprisingly Chris has found that while teenagers and adults approach the problem of shepherding in totally different ways, the outcome is the same.

"Teenagers are usually full of energy and enthusiasm and run around with little direction and adults tend to be more measured, more thoughtful and will discuss their strategy. However, they still get the same result in the same amount of time. There is very little difference in that initial task."

In 2013, Chris, working alongside his business and life partner Caroline Palmer, is planning to license the training strategy to other parts of the UK. They have also attracted interest from overseas, particularly the USA, and will be exploring the possibilities of doing the same over the pond.

And Chris's top tip for anyone considering being a shepherd for a day? Make a plan, stick to it as a team and execute it. It sounds easy, but something tells me it's not...



## Fact file

**Owner:** Chris Farnsworth and Caroline Palmer  
**Business:** Raising the Baa  
**Location:** Chippenham  
**Website:** [www.raisingthebaa.com](http://www.raisingthebaa.com)