

Selling Butcher's Lambs Privately

Having written about local livestock market prices for Southdown butcher's lambs in a past newsletter I thought it might be helpful to share my experience of private sales. Between July and December, I sell 20-24 butcher's lambs privately a year. It's usually 4-6 lambs once a month excluding August when everyone is away. These sales help provide me with a steady, reliable, loyal and mostly unfussy market. Customers nearly always appreciate the quality of the lamb. Many regulars describe it as the "best lamb ever", though one or two would like it a little leaner. The customer is of course they right, even though they are wrong! As, for me, a bit of fat improves the taste and texture, but to keep them happy I quietly get the butcher to trim the chops.

Building a Client Base

It can take a while to build up a client base but it is worth it. Word of mouth is a good starting point, and certainly I have found local friends who do coffee mornings have been able to rope in a few more to buy half a lamb. I am lucky enough to have a community shop and sell quite a few through that. I provide adverts for their notice board and on the counter, there is a list where buyers put their name and phone number down, the month they would like the lamb and if they want a whole or a half lamb. In exchange for their support, I donate £5.50/half lamb to the shop. I also provide the shop with a Q and A to answer any queries, such as how much space does it take in the freezer.

One more thing I occasionally do is to offer a half lamb as a charity auction or raffle prize, though I make it clear the buyer collects (I have no wish to deliver to John O'Groats or Lands End!).



Half a lamb is roughly half a freezer shelf

Keeping in Touch

I don't do any regular emails, newsletters. A deliberate policy – I get enough junk mail and don't wish to add to anyone else's burden; but with regular/past clients I will usually follow up by text a year later asking if they want another half. Most buyers seem happy to buy a half or whole lamb once a year. I have a couple of customers who seem to live off lamb and may buy 2-4 times a year if I have any spares going. In the week before killing customers are texted with a reminder – checking how they want the lamb cut up -usually as before - and confirming collection day and times. Then on collection day I follow up with a reminder that their lamb is ready.

Keeping it Simple

I am lucky in that my local slaughter-house and butcher is small scale and only fifteen minutes away, so I try to keep it simple to keep costs low and minimise the time and effort. The butcher supplies the lamb – offal apart - in a large plastic bag (though he does do lamb boxes). In the early days I used to repack the bag, but this is a faff: how many chops does the customer want in a bag? and there is the food hygiene issue. Customers are given the choice of joints halved or whole, neck is left on the shoulder and the breast stuffed and rolled (extra £3.00) or deboned. Odd bits of breast, neck boned or otherwise were always the last bits of lamb in my mother's freezer and an excuse not buy any more lamb so I am keen to make sure that the less exotic cuts are used up sooner rather than later!

Offal varies partly due to the meat hygiene inspector and partly on customer preference. Most will take some liver - it usually works out at 250-350g sliced liver per half lamb, and there are one or two

who want the lamb hearts. One enterprising customer wanted everything that was going, as they were going to make their own haggis! I no longer make a charge for the offal though did increase my lamb price a few years back to cover the marginal extra cost.

Fair Pricing

My lamb price depends on the local market price for butcher's lambs. I know Southdown lamb should really be at a premium, but my customers are locals and often friends so I try as far as possible to do what seems fair. My butcher tells me what he is charging for half a lamb - he never specifies a weight! I then take account of the prevailing market price for lamb, slaughter and cutting charges and charge at price per kg for the **uncut** half lamb. The uncut point is important as roughly a quarter of the lamb's weight is bone, so if you are selling deboned meat you could end up out of pocket. Although lamb prices do fluctuate during the season I have usually just worked at a set price for the year, for the record my butchered lamb price in 2022 was £9.50/kg Dwt.

Delivery

I do my best to avoid delivery, though once a year I do a mini trek round Cambridgeshire for loyal friends and former colleagues. It's so much easier and cheaper if people collect. I give them a time window usually 3-6pm on a Friday and most are able to collect it. However, it is not too much of a problem to drop half a lamb off in the village especially as it is sometimes more convenient for me.

Getting Paid

One of the silver linings of COVID was that everyone has got more used to BACS payments, and I also learned to deposit cheques through the bank app on my phone. Almost all clients now pay by BACS and most are pretty prompt – i.e. within 48 hours of collection. There are one or two who “lose the invoice” but after a week I chase them. No bad payers so far (phew!). It may be riskier than cash, but in the old days it was a real pain doing a 40-minute round trip to the bank, as well as finding coins for the car park.



Half a lamb: two whole joints, stuffed breast, 13-15 chops (cutlets, loin & chump), liver and a kidney

Economics

Butchery costs are typically £38-40/head; market costs £3-4/lamb. Transport costs - except for my Cambridgeshire Grand tour are very similar. My smaller 28-32kg lambs sell for 20% less than average at market and fortunately some of my private sales prefer smaller lambs so preferentially my smaller lambs go to private sales. Overall, my private sales will - depending on lamb weight - earn me 50-75% more per lamb. But, and here's the rub, my private sales take roughly 2-3 hours more time, than market sales, this is offset by the positive feedback and appreciation contact you get from your customers .

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