# The Dorper Lamb Story

## Graeme Howie

[graeme@dorperlamb.com.au](mailto:graeme@dorperlamb.com.au)

The Dorper Lamb Company and Brand was established in 2005 to be a breed specific Lamb Brand. This brand is based on the Dorper Sheep breed, which was initially established in the 1930's by crossing a Dorset sheep from Britain and a Black Faced Persian sheep from Iran.

The Dorper Breed was mainly introduced into South Africa and prospered in the Southern African savannah farming areas, before being introduced into Western Australia via embryo transfer by innovative Livestock breeder Stanley Alexander Dorman from Dale River.

In 2003/2004 while exporting breeding livestock from Australia, Graeme Howie and Stan Dorman were approached by their Chinese clients to send about 1000 Dorper Sheep to Shandong Province in China.

During the selection and buying of the Dorper Sheep, Graeme Howie sat down for lunch with Maggie Maslin from Bakers Hill and had his first taste of Dorper Lamb (Loin chops). The taste and quality was immediately noticed - " Tasty and clean flavoured lamb with a very mild aroma, low and non-intrusive fat that crisped up under the grill".

The Dorper Lamb was bred for Chop's and not Socks.

Being a shedder and a non-wool producing sheep, many benefits had been identified for this breed to be promoted and separated from other lamb, many animal husbandry practise's had been eliminated and this sheep breed was producing a premium lamb quality with an interesting story to be told.

Inspired by the success of the Mount Barker Chicken Brand and seeing how the branding of wines had been developed from a choice of white and red to a great deal of varieties and regions, it was now planned to try Lamb branding by breed marketing in the 21st century.

We established the Brand and starting selling the Whole Lamb Box.

The Dorper Lamb brand logo and registration was applied for and accepted. This was the easy part. Now to breed more Dorper sheep, process the lamb into a nice range of cuts, carefully vacuumed packed and then sold and delivered to the market.

It was immediately noticeable that everybody was quite happy to buy the racks, however, a strategy was needed to sell all the cuts together until I could work out how to sell all the cuts in balance, once we could reached a certain level of production.

The Whole Lamb Box sale was established and the market was very receptive, and during the early days was quite successful.

Enter Polly Trefort and the Hillside Abattoir. Polly had been busy building the Q Lamb Brand over the years, which was very successful and he had established his distribution. Polly, whom I had met as a student at the Narrogin Agriculture College was a sharer of information and could see the benefits of helping me. He set me straight on what to do, processed and packed the Dorper Lamb and within a few months we had become a valuable client to the Hillside Abattoir. We had a couple of good years together with Hillside but their circumstances had changed and the works changed hands to an overseas company who didn't wish to process.

### Ups and Downs of Lamb Processing

During the Hillside years - Dorper Lambs came in from both our own supply and a growing band of other Dorper Lamb farmers and the sales where building. Although the mining boom was creating steady domestic sales, the costs of processing and distribution were increasing. The strong Australian Dollar also made exports difficult during this period.

The Dorper Lamb Company had been well capitalised on recommendations by our Chairman. We had increased distributions via our four Dorper Lamb vans, had established ourselves as a player in the food service industry. The company had spread to Melbourne, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. But processing at Hillside had ground to a halt. Domestic processing was arranged at various processing rooms in Perth - but the quality of the packing wasn't as good as an export accredited works. We pressed on and developed support from WAMMCO in sourcing, cutting and packing with the Western Meat Packer Group, and now with V & V Walsh. We have now grown enough to become reliable clients of these processors.

Although the Dorper Lamb food service and export sales were growing steady, expansion means more money needs to be spent on staff, marketing and business development. Cost of production continues to increase and lamb prices across the board have been stronger. Trying to obtain consumer price increases over the past two years at the same pace as the farm gate price and processing cost increases, we have found to be unachievable. The consumer will switch to other cheaper proteins - such as pork and chicken.

With the mining boom over, down came the Aussie Dollar. Exports started to grow and now the export expansion in sales means more money is needed to fund this growth.

The current result after 10 years in the business - The Dorper Lamb brand and distribution is well established, and it has taken time and money - always more than what you think.

### What we are doing less of

Most forms of advertising and promotions are not value for money. Word of mouth and social media is much better and a lot cheaper. No discounting and free promotions - If the product is good, good people will buy it. We are always aiming to keep our overheads down and looking for better value in everything we do.

### What we are doing more of

Client focus - Visit them - talk to them face to face - listen and identify from them what is needed and match food service needs. Create and recreate ways to sell our product.

Improve on-line sales by better portion size.

Lift up the staff we have - finding more young people with sharp intuition and people skills.

Overseas education and training - very important - 99% of people in the region still haven't had their best Dorper Lamb experience yet!

The Dorper Sheep Society in Australia, following our lead and are asking their 600 members to produce a consistent product to be known as prime Dorper lamb. These growers all producing the same quality MSA grade lamb opens up a great supply chain of product across Australia.

The Dorper Lamb Company and the Dorper Brand continues to grow strongly.