# Spinning a good yarn

When former London stockbroker Sue Blacker bought her first Gotland sheep, setting up a wool mill was the last thing on her mind

Words **Tiffany Daneff** Photographs **Andrew Montgomery**



**The smell hits you first, strong and sheepy** as an overripe cheese. This vivid sensual assault is more than matched, however, by the rumble and hum of the vast cast-iron scouring, carding and spinning machines – set all along the length of the yarn mill inside a unit on an otherwise ordinary business park on the outskirts of Launceston in Cornwall.

Fleece spills out of giant sacks like locks on to a salon floor. Some are curled and chocolatey, others ash blond and tightly crimped. Each bag is marked with a blue luggage label bearing the name of its owner and breed of sheep. 'A. Wear: Shetland fawn, brown, black' reads one.

'That's Andy Wear on the Mendips,' shouts Sue Blacker, 61, above the din. Sue is the usually softly spoken owner of a flock of rare-breed Gotland sheep and a former City stockbroker who, in a series of apparently innocent decisions, ended up buying the mill in 2005 and transporting it here on a lorry – roller by heavy roller – from its former home in Lampeter, Wales.

Since then The Natural Fibre Company has become the busiest natural wool mill in the country, offering 700 to 800 smallholders, craft shops and farmers the chance to turn greasy bracken-strewn fleece into soft balls of yarn, which are either left in their original shades or softly coloured with organically accredited dyes. Last year they processed 17 tonnes of fleece. For farmers this provides much-needed extra cash; for smallholders and natural-yarn knitters, the chance to produce and use wool from individual breeds and flocks.

With 60 breeds Britain has more native varieties of sheep than anywhere in the world, each different and each adapted to survive in particular locations. North Ronaldsay sheep, to take one particularly fine example, have adapted to graze on seaweed.

Sue's herd of Gotland, a silky long-haired primitive sheep, were originally bred by Vikings from Sweden and are known to be resilient. She bought them in the early Nineties, when the family left London for the country, where ▷

◁ she worked as a manager for an NGO, The Devon and Cornwall Development Company, then as chief executive for two charities. 'I was ready to leave the City as I felt it had become less interesting, less moral, and more likely to implode after the Big Bang, though it took 20 years to do so... And I wanted to do something more real.'

She and her husband Douglas Bence, a writer and journalist, also ran holiday cottages set in five acres of land. 'Douglas was spending his life cutting grass outside the holiday cottages. He's left-handed and rather gung-ho,' says Sue. 'I was watching him tipping around on the upper slopes and thought "I can't be doing with this."' They considered goats to do the job, but decided on sheep, which seemed easy to look after.

'It's about 20 to 30 minutes a day to count and feed them,' says Sue, who is a fount of knowledge on all things ovine. 'And probably another hour a week checking fences and going to the feed merchants.' She has help with shearing but manages the lambing on her own. Today she has 14 ewes, three rams and eight wethers (castrated rams).

Each individual sheep's wool is different, says Sue, dipping a hand into a surprisingly bouncy mound of fleece. This has been hand-sorted and cleaned before being fed through the scourer, which wets, washes, rakes and 'mangles' the wool, removing the dirt and lanolin. Then it's into the tumble dryer before being blown into bags.

'It has memory,' she says, squeezing the highly crimped fleece, which immediately bounces back into shape. There's a way to go yet, though, before we see anything resembling yarn. Next stop the 'Fearnaught', the Victorian-looking blending machine, with chains that turn cogs that spin rollers powerful enough to mash your arms.

With a dose of machine oil and water to coax it in, the fleece begins its journey through various different machines that will tease and blend the wool, spreading out and aligning the fibres. (Reject fleeces and fibres from this process are sent to a nearby carpet company where they can be used to make underlay.) The resulting cascade of Rapunzel-like tresses must now be spun on to giant spindles, then plied for strength before a final wash and dry.

**Shear hard work**
Sue Blacker's mill takes raw fleeces and turns them into soft balls of yarn by a process of scouring, blending, carding, dyeing and spinning

**Sue has taken a carding machine the size of a Mini to pieces – and, most importantly, put it back together**

'Essentially the machines are doing the same job as a hand-spinner,' says Sue. It hurts just thinking how long that would take: 100 hours from start to finish to make enough yarn for a pullover.

Even more disturbing is how much human history and knowledge bound up in the wool trade has been lost – not just the breeds (now being saved by organisations such as the Rare Breeds Survival Trust), but the know-how. Skilled workers are almost impossible to find; Sue's answer is to train apprentices, but the work is physical, noisy and not for everyone.

Which makes it all the more impressive that Sue, a white-collar desk-jobber all her life, has actually taken a carding machine to pieces, cleaned each individual part and rebuilt it. 'I bought a small one, about the size of a Mini,' she says, 'and got two pulleys capable of lifting a tonne to remove the rollers.' How on earth did she get it back together? 'I photographed every bit.'

Her interest led to meeting the owners of The Natural Fibre Company and finally to buying the business and bringing it to Cornwall.

With her City and NGO backgrounds she knew all about producing business plans: nevertheless she had to approach eight banks before she got her loan. Sue also knew that it would take time before the mill saw a profit. So in 2008 she launched Blacker Designs, which sells wool, mohair and alpaca cushions, blankets and throws commissioned from British designers, and Blacker Yarns to sell her own yarns and knitting patterns.

From an original staff of five, the company now employs 12 people. It's a family enterprise with her husband overseeing the website and children Sam and Renata helping out in between university and work.

The dedication and hard work is finally paying off and The Natural Fibre Company is at last breaking even. But making money, though important, was never the whole point. 'I want to help farmers by adding value to farm products and to prove that the UK can manufacture high-end niche products. We have such lovely wools,' says Sue.

But most of all, one suspects, this is about her flock, especially David, Sonny, Caliban and the much-missed Jake, her very first Gotland wether who died at the ripe old age of 15. ◆

*Visit blackeryarns.co.uk to see Sue's yarns, or call 01566 777635 for catalogues. Sue is offering readers 10% discount on all yarns bought online or by phone until April 30; enter SAGA10PC2012 at checkout*

**Find out more**

*thenaturalfibre.co.uk; blackerdesigns.co.uk.* Pure Wool *by Sue Blacker (A&C Black, £16.99) will be published in August*

**The Woolsack project**

*Take part in Sue's campaign to raise the profile of British wool, by making cushions for Olympic athletes. For details and inspiration, visit woolsack.org*