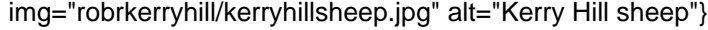


A yarn about the Kerry Hill...

Contributed by Rob R

What is a Kerry Hill? I guess that the majority of the population of this country couldn't tell you the answer to that; tell them it's a breed of sheep, and nine times out of ten, they will assume it is Irish. Educate them further, that there is a range of mountains around the little Welsh village of Kerry in Montgomeryshire, from which the breed takes its name, and they will go away with some knowledge of a little known British breed of sheep. Chances are that this knowledge will turn into but a faint recollection if ever they hear the name mentioned again. {kl_thumbimage

When people think of sheep, they think of the numerous commercial breeds, because of their widespread existence, or the less numerous rare breeds, because of their novelty, what gets lost in the middle are those mid-way localised breeds, such as the Kerry Hill, whose numbers are not low enough to be rare, nor numerous enough to be common. That was part of the inspiration to have the wool from the only Kerry Hill flock in East Yorkshire, spun into 100% pure Kerry Hill knitting wool.

For someone with limited experience and lack of any apparent skill for the job, shearing sheep is a challenge. The fact that employing a contractor would probably be cheaper than maintaining the machinery to do the job is irrelevant. It's the principle that counts. Having gathered our flock from the various corners of the parish (sometimes harder work than the actual shearing), we're ready to start. Now, shearing is a very simple action to master- the real skill comes in positioning the sheep correctly so as not to stress the animal and to ensure it sits still. The satisfaction comes when you realise you are on the last leg (did you know that is where that particular phrase came from?) of the last sheep.

With the woolly coats of fifteen sheep removed (including one very heavy, strong, determined tup) I am several pounds lighter and have a huge pile of tightly rolled white fleeces. I've seen the advertisement for the Natural Fibre Company in the classified section of the 'Ark' magazine, and this kind of service appeals greatly to my sense of direct marketing of the farm's produce. One little problem, none of the information on the NFC nor the British Wool Marketing Board websites mention the Kerry Hill as an exempt breed - after all, it is mainstream and white - just what the industry likes. However, not wanting my lovely soft staple to be lost in the blended world of the 'British Wool' mark, I contact the NFC to request the necessary forms and bags.

It's a busy summer, and the storage of the wool is becoming a problem. Contacting the NFC seemed impossible, what with their e-mail gremlins and my fax machine sending out coded messages. However, eventually they resorted to the good old postal service, having not received my previous message, and I replied post haste with the necessary information of quantities. This year, I promise myself, I will get more organised, knowing what I am to expect. The day came when two wool bags arrived to pack all these fleeces, and they began to look distinctly inadequate for the job- the Kerry wool having such a springy staple, they were full by the time we had six fleeces in - somehow we managed to compress them all in & stitch up the tops.

Our first shearing had not raised the necessary minimum weight of 20kg, having only six sheep, but with the following year's ewes, ewe lambs, wethers and the tup, fifteen fleeces were approaching 40kg - at 50% returned weight (by which the NFC charges) that was going to be 200 balls of wool to cope with. We had opted to have them returned in 100g washed skeins, not really knowing what to expect, and not yet having contacted the wool board about selling it, I didn't want to get it all wrapped for sale (at extra cost) and find I had to keep the lot.

The NFC runs a very busy schedule, with organic wool being taken throughout the month of August, and being too late to get it in before; we sent the fleeces in mid-November and received the invoice on Christmas Eve. This paid, we awaited the wool in the New Year. Somehow, I had imagined the finished 20.5kg of yarn to come back looking somewhat smaller than the wool bags we sent. However, what arrived was one bag, about three-quarter full, with the delivery note stating '2 of 2', and a very similar '1 of 2', arriving the next day.

Scoured, carded, blended, spun and washed, the fleeces tinged with all that sheep collect, had been transformed into

something you would see on the shelves of a wool shop. The smell and feel gave the game away that there was nothing artificial about this product. It was certainly good enough to sell, and the colour of the Kerry looks so good in the natural state, it fell to winding 200 skeins into neat little balls & designing some nice little bands to identify its origins. Two pieces of technology, the complex PC and the simple wool winder made these tasks possible and we were then ready to recoup the costs.

One little thing remained; the wool board had still not been contacted. I started to write a letter, explaining our philosophy, to request that we be allowed to keep our own wool for sale as product of the farm. The fact that our small flock would mean the cost of handling the fleeces would probably be the same as any revenue gained worked in our favour and the exemption was granted, at least I received a letter to tell me that I would be receiving another letter, granting our exemption. Now, I wonder how big a flock I can have, before they change their mind...Discuss this article in the forum Visit Rob R's website to find out more about the Kerry Hill and Rosewood Farms' products