

A family success story

Toft Alpacas are bred with sound conformation, exhibiting fleeces with a sustainable fineness and above average density



Toft Alpacas has become one of the leading breeders in the country and now has a multi-faceted business. Owner Rob Bettinson tells the story

It started 14 years ago, in late 1997, when the Bettinson family finally took delivery of four female alpacas with three males at foot, having paid more for these than we ever had for a car. Our eldest child, Kerry, was 13, our youngest, Grant, was 7 and Scott and Laura were somewhere in between. We gave them one each. Kerry chose Black, Scott White, Laura Fawn and Grant Brown. As we built the herd, Grant named all his future brown offspring after Star Wars characters, Laura her fawns after spices, Scott his whites after anything to do with snow and Kerry her blacks after anything that came into her head. Over the years, we all shared in the trials and tribulations of breeding livestock, and we never had to have any conversation about 'birds and bees'.

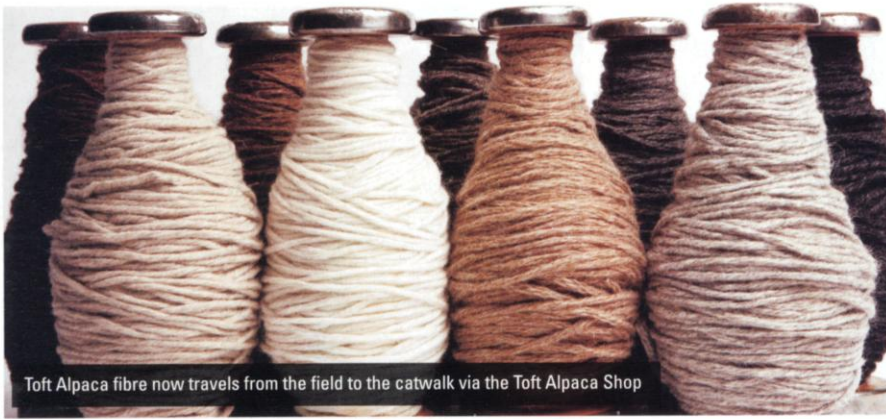
As I write this today, Grant is out in the fields with the tractor earning a little extra to supplement his student loan. Kerry is instructing her staff in the Toft Alpaca Shop, having spent most of the morning in design meetings with her knitters. Laura our 23 year old is busy in her flat in London putting the final touches to the next Toft Alpaca Stud adverts. Scott, who was 8 when we first got smitten with alpacas, is excused at the moment for he's off studying Mandarin for a year at Renmin University in Beijing.

My wife, Shirley, and I have spent the morning hurriedly taking pictures of our show team wearing their rosettes and ribbons, as we prepare for the return visit of B.D. Wheeler, the shearer who will swiftly strip them of their fibre this afternoon. By Friday, their fleeces will be rolling through Hagger's Mill in Banbury in one of our fine batches continuing

the journey that will take them first to luxury yarn and then through the skilled hands of the knitters to land in a month's time in the Toft Alpaca Shop as something soft and exclusive to bring pleasure to its purchaser.

In what is now known as our 'alpaca years', we've had great joy and some sadness within our herd, but our family has grown to accept and enjoy a rural/farming lifestyle that colours everything we do. Regrets? No, not many. On balance, our alpacas have presented opportunities for us all to travel the world in pursuit of genetics and inspiration for designs, strategies and experience with which to improve our herd and our retail business. These fascinating creatures have given us far more than we ever asked of them and continue to provide endless interest and challenge to our very busy lives. We have met, along the way, some fantastic people, both in the UK and across the world. In the past 12 months, I have been invited to judge alpacas in Norway, Eire and Brittany and I will be again packing my bags for a trip to Holland in December. Shirley is now in the final stages of her judge training – obsessed, or what?

The Toft Alpaca herd is now 200 strong in all colours, both Huacaya and Suri, and Toft Alpacas has become a bit of a visitor attraction on the side of Draycote Water in Warwickshire. Over the years, we have created a semi-parkland feel by developing the public footpaths which run through the farm into laneways that the dog walkers, cyclists, joggers, Norwegian stick walkers, ornithologists, fishermen and all those others who use the reservoir can enjoy. The public love bringing their friends to see the



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alpacos, and many of them dutifully pop into the Toft Alpaca Shop to complete the story and treat their guests to a little luxury.

At Toft, our focus has always been to breed alpacos with sound conformation, exhibiting fleeces with a sustainable fineness and above average density that will produce, annually, a profitable amount of useable fleece for the lifespan of the alpaca. We continue to pursue that goal avidly, and each year we make big improvements in our herd averages, bringing down the microns, increasing density and mainly pursuing longevity of use and sustainability in the fleeces we produce.

The demands created by retailing the final product now colour all our breeding decisions and have a great influence on the herd as a whole. Our selection and analysis begins at birth and ends at death as we monitor the productiveness, progression, quality and longevity of the fleece throughout the alpaca's lifespan. This process gives us the ability to make informed breeding decisions which ultimately will enhance the profitability of our fibre.

Until we eat them (if we ever do) fibre is everything with alpacos. Only if we can make all our alpacos produce useable and profitable fibre from their birth to their death can we guarantee a sustainable future for these creatures in the UK and Europe; and we are now getting there. The non-breeding males we sell today, as pet and guardian alpacos, now carry a quality fleece that enables their owners, if they so wish, to add value in such a way

that they will very easily pay for their upkeep from the outset. This bodes well for the future and may well mean that the elusive advent of the purely 'fibre herd' may well be not too long coming.

The Toft Alpaca herd keeps the Manor buzzing all year long and has developed into a business with many facets as we aim to provide something for everyone with an interest in alpacos.

We breed well-behaved halter-trained alpacos to suit all budgets and provide ongoing 24/7 backup to all our clients. We sell pregnant and non-pregnant females and, in addition, offer a large selection of halter-trained pet and guardian alpacos to those who want the benefits without the breeding. We have a wide range of pedigree prizewinning males standing at stud in all colours and offer a versatile mating service. We host a busy schedule of Introductory and Advanced Husbandry, Field to Fashion, Fibre, Felting Knitting, and Textile workshops throughout the year. We host Alpaca Family Fun days for those that want to get close but don't want to take our alpacos home. We even have on farm holiday accommodation available through the Toft Manor Cottage for short breaks or overnight stays for those who want to get close and enjoy the experience without responsibility.

We strive continuously to make Toft Alpacos the complete package, believing that this is the only way to establish the alpaca in the UK and Europe as a sustainable alternative. We are living our dream and enjoying every minute of it!

www.toft-alpacas.co.uk
www.thetoftalpacashop.co.uk

Toft Alpaca fibre now travels from the field to the catwalk via the Toft Alpaca Shop selling at exhibitions across the UK and internet retailing to customers across five continents. In addition to what we produce, we now buy in large quantities of Huacaya and Suri alpaca fleece which is transformed into an expansive range of high quality yarns and luxury knitwear to satisfy the every increasing demand. To celebrate five years in business, we are even hosting an all-knitting all-dancing Birthday Party for The Toft Alpaca Shop on August 6, 2011- see the website for more details.



Wildboardclough Alpacos Huacaya Alpacos For Sale

BAS registered and
microchipped.
Most colours and ages available.
Breeding stock.
Companion Stock.

for further information
telephone Kim on 07887 508244

Fleece and yarn show

The GWR Fleece and Yarn Show will take place on Saturday October 1 at the Standerwick Centre, near Frome, Somerset.

This is the second year of this innovative show, which sees the fleeces being judged in front of an audience.

All first placed fleeces will be entered into the final for the Supreme Championship at the end of the day.

There will be trade stands promoting alpaca products, and refreshments will be available.

This year, for the first time, there will be a yarn competition, and all alpaca breeders large or small are invited to enter their wool. Entries for the yarn show are free of charge.

Contact Pauline at Piple Court Alpacos

(pauline@piplecourtalpacas.co.uk) for yarn show entries, and Viv Walker at Reddingvale Alpacos (reddingvale@yahoo.co.uk) for fleece entries, or visit the GWR Fleece and Yarn Show website www.gwr-alpaca-show.co.uk