

image at home

*Fashion and accessories
from the range
available at The
Toft Alpaca Shop
Photo: Gianni Diliberto*



A woolly
wonder

When Warwickshire couple Rob and Shirley Bettinson bought four alpacas to help keep the grass down, they never imagined they'd grow to a herd of more than 200, let alone that they'd present a lucrative business opportunity. **Amanda O'Hare** met them to hear the story... **Photos: Mike Baker**



The Bettinson family have become used to sharing their Warwickshire home with the likes of Princess Leia and C-3PO. However the members of their extended family are not the actual characters from *Star Wars*, but some of their adorable alpacas.

When Rob and wife Shirley first moved into the former 16th century hunting lodge, they had no idea the acres around Toft Manor would one day be home to hundreds of alpacas.

These exotic Peruvian creatures have become a familiar sight to the Warwickshire walkers who pass by their farm.

Fields of the endearing creatures can be seen on the rural landscape, but they're not just there to look cute. They are also helping support the family's fashion business.

Daughter Kerry launched The Toft Alpaca Shop selling alpaca cardigans, dresses, hats, legwarmers and bags, as well as knitting kits so those who have the talent can make the items themselves.

The boutique, which opened in 2006 and is managed by Kerry, is the latest success story for the prize winning herd and stud, which was established in 1997 in the hamlet of Toft near the village of Dunchurch.

Today it comprises more than 200 alpacas and is an active stud specialising in Accoyo blood lines and Best Browns.

The tribute to *Star Wars* came about when Rob and Shirley purchased their first four alpacas, one for each of

their then young children Kerry, Laura, Scott and Grant.

As the family grew up and the herd grew in size, each of the Bettinson children had the responsibility of naming the new additions.

Kerry opted for famous models' names including Naomi, Laura had Cinnamon and from then on named the fawns after spices. Son Scott was responsible for the whites, so had a snow theme, and Grant progressed from Princess Leia to other names linked to *Star Wars*.

Shirley said: "There have been so many over the years we had to move on to the names of *Star Wars* planets and we even had someone who said they had to buy our alpaca called C-3PO simply because of its name!"

The Bettinson clan clearly have a deep affection for the alpacas, but originally Rob and Shirley were looking for a place to raise their family rather than a herd.

Shirley said: "When we bought this house it needed a lot of work doing to it. We had four young children and the schools were good in this area. At first we wanted something that would eat the grass close to the house.

"We approached farmers about sheep but we never ended up getting

Each has
their own
personality



Kerry in The Toft Alpaca Shop



Rob and Shirley Bettinson with daughter Kerry and three of their alpacas outside Toft Manor (MHRA-18-02-02-32)



Kerry in The Toft Alpaca Shop, which is situated at the farm in the old bakery (MHRA-18-02-02-50)



Rob and Shirley in their spacious family kitchen at Toft Manor (MHRA-18-02-02-02)

any. Then Rob saw some alpacas at the Royal Show in 1995.

"He had taken Kerry along with him and they both came back saying what lovely animals they were. It took me a couple of years to be convinced because the last thing I wanted to do was have to look after four big animals with the children growing up.

"We ended up with four pregnant females and decided if it helps keep the roof on the house from the income we would give it a try.

"We realised what a lovely fibre their fleece had and we wanted to do something with it and it just progressed."

Over the years all of the children have mucked in helping tend to the herd, and they have become part of the family fabric.

There are about 22 colours and Kerry stressed they don't use any dye at all – there is no chemical process. The texture of the alpaca accessories is wonderfully soft, similar to a luxury fabric like cashmere.

Kerry said: "People love it because you can wear alpaca next to your skin and it doesn't feel itchy."

Following shearing of the 200 prize winning alpacas, the wool is spun locally into yarn. It is then delivered to craftsmen and women across the UK working to produce a vast range of exclusive knitwear.

A spot of TLC

Rob and Shirley are originally from Teesside and met as students. Rob worked as a theatre director and writer, which took him all over the world before the couple moved to Coventry and then the Rugby area.

They eventually settled in Toft and their spacious period property has stunning views of the nearby reservoir at Draycote Water.

Shirley said: "When we came to first see the house as soon as we saw that view it was sold. But there was a lot of work to be done.

"It was a listed grade two building, which had not been cared for for many years. It had been a farm and the property had been split into two homes.

"There were a lot of things lying around like barbed wire; we spent many weekends setting about tidying up the place using a tiny garden tractor that the children used to like having rides on.

"When we first got the house it came with 10 acres, but we have bought more land since then and four years ago Severn Trent leased another 43 to us so the farm now covers 60 acres."

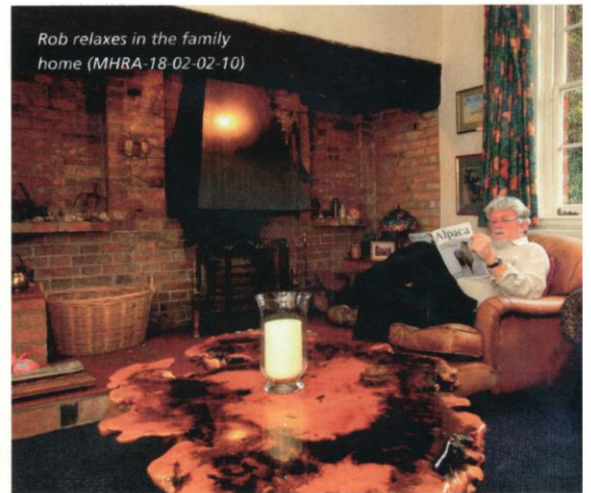
The family home has 10 bedrooms and the couple have created a couple of bathrooms in the attic area.



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Photo: Gianni Diliberto*



Outside Toft Manor



Rob relaxes in the family home (MHBA-18-02-02-10)

The kitchen was originally two rooms but has been opened up into a large space where the family loved to sit together for meals or working on homework when the children were still at school.

Under floor heating was added and the electrics fixed. The house has a timber frame and the couple had a bit of a battle on their hands when they wanted to expose the original beams to make a feature of them.

Rob said: "You have to be sympathetic to a building like this. We wanted to maintain the property and replace the rotten sash windows.

"We wanted to show that we were keeping them the style that they were – we prefer older buildings.

"It was Elizabethan and in the 1700s they put a Georgian skin on it. We still have the original oven in the bakery and original fireplaces. With an old house you have to expect to live with its foibles."

Shirley said: "It also had to be a home for the children. Laura, who used to horse ride a lot, used to bring her horse right up onto the patio area around the house, but we have never let any of the alpacas in the house, except for once when a baby one was very cold and the children wanted to bring it in."

There is always something "alpaca" happening at Toft, including introductory husbandry days, family fun days and advanced alpaca workshops and courses throughout the year.

We never let any alpacas in the house

The farm shop is open Monday to Friday from 10am to 4pm and the on shop is always available for shoppers to browse the fabulous collections.

The family home has evolved over the years, like their business, and they even have a holiday let.

It is estimated that there are about 850 alpaca owners in the UK and about 300 breeders.

Shirley said: "We were one of the first to set up with alpacas in the Midlands. They are not aggressive, we call them stressbusters because you waste hours sitting in the field just watching them. They are quite comical and people love the alpaca walks we run here."

Rob added: "They are very charming, gentle animals and their colours are stunning. You don't get sheep the colour of conkers.

"People just love to be near them and each one of them has their own personality."

■ A Field to Fashion one day course will be staged on April 30, dealing with all aspects of alpaca fleece and fibre. For more information about upcoming events, contact Rob and Shirley Bettinson at Toft Manor on 01788 810626 www.toft-alpacas.co.uk Contact The Toft Alpaca Shop on 01788 810626. To view the latest collection go to www.thetoftalpacashop.co.uk

