



WE ALL HARBOUR A DESIRE TO LIVE A DREAM, EVEN IF SOMETIMES WE AREN'T SURE WHAT THAT DREAM IS. ROSIE WALLER MEETS A COUPLE WHOSE LIVES WERE TURNED AROUND BY A HERD OF ALPACAS



# not just a pretty fleece

Jenny Macfarty uses a lovely phrase as we cross her croquet lawn and enter the parkland beyond, where dozens of alpacas huddle beneath a sycamore tree. "They have enchanted our lives," she says.

Slow, elegant and laconic, Jenny is calm and earnest. We are near the alpaca zone, "Katarina's Kataresona," she is calling, and a small white alpaca licks over all big eyes and lashes and a mouth fixed in a little grin.

Katarina has a special place in Jenny's heart, although each of the alpacas here - there are 88 - Jenny knows as intimately as I do my pet dog. Though young Katarina, I later discover, has an even greater place in Jenny's husband's heart. Graham Macfarty introduces himself as an alpaca farmer with justifiable pride. There are neatly assembled pairs of green wellies, wax jackets and fishing rods in the utility room, and at first he appears to be a typical country gentleman. But how many country gents get themselves out of bed at 5.30 every morning to bottle feed one of their livestock, and continue with four-hourly feeds throughout the day?

"I used to get up in the pale black for Katarina, and she'd come cantering across," he smiles. "There's a huge chunk of me riding with her. She's absolutely gorgeous. I had a dream when she was not very well that she was going to hit the heights and get a Supreme Show Champion ribbon. And she did, this year at the Northumberland County Show. It was like a fairy tale."

"She has real personality. She has a sense of humour and accepts us as equals and as part of her herd. Alpacas don't normally do this, but she will come up to

me and I can tickle behind her ears. The care and respect we have for them, they give us back."

Previously in the wool industry in Edinburgh, while Jenny worked in the sales department of The Scotsman newspaper, here is a couple living and breathing a new vocation with an enthusiasm that makes you question your own life.

The alpaca trade, very well established in Australia with its long history of producing fine Merino wools, is doing increasingly well in this country, with some 900 members registered with the British Alpaca Society and about 30 breeders within a 100-mile radius of the Macfartys.

If Jenny and Graham are anything to go by, there's work involved. When a mother has a low milk supply, which actually happens rarely, every feed is logged.

The book on the kitchen island tells us that this morning, little Lucien was given 200mls at 7.15am and 200mls at 8.30am. He'll be fed again at 6pm and 6pm.

"Graham has a book logging 2,500 feeds for Katarina," Jenny says. "They are the most beautiful little creatures, and it's only wish that we had started this 15 years ago. We would have gone to Peru and selected our own, and possibly had more."

As it is, with just five years in the business - the idea came from a family friend in Jenny's native North West Highlands who had just inherited a herd - Graham is already chair of the British Alpaca Society and Jenny has recruited some of the region's best weavers, crocheters and knitters to make a range of beautiful shawls, clothing and baby items to sell at farmers' markets.

Jim takes into the dining room, where a huge antique dining table, I imagine



wouldn't look out of place in Buckingham Palace, is covered in home-made shawls and knits, the result of half of last year's fibre production. Jenny uses 12 local hand knitters and is particularly keen on the hand-woven scarves and shawls, which are classic and contemporary at the same time. "The woman who does the weaving is only 25 and lives in County Durham," she says. "She's terribly talented."

Each piece comes with a little tag showing the alpaca whose fibre it was made from, their name, and a bit of background. We learn, for example, that Hope, born in 2003, is "quietly confident of her position in the herd. She has a stocky, strong look and carries a very soft fleece, not particularly dense but with a beautiful lustre, making it look like wet tar at skin level."

Hope is their finest animal, and has produced fleece for the most beautiful shawl. I'm tempted to buy it. Soft, with big crocheted swirls, it makes you feel instantly generous and like you'd have a forever. At £798, I log it as a potential special present.

Katarina's shawl is also lovely. Gentle and Heidi are full sisters, one dark grey and the other light. Their combined fleeces have been used with dramatic effect on a beautiful poncho.

"The black you get from our alpacas is real black. People sometimes ask if the colours will run, but they're all completely natural; nothing is dyed," says Jenny.

Perhaps the real gem here is a black and white woven scarf; the sort of thing you'd expect to find in Harrod and the like. There's a beautifully soft teddy bear, also made locally, and some felt cushions made from the off-cuts.

While Jenny and Graham don't have to depend on the alpacas for their sole income, there are people who do, and they are determined to promote the alpaca business.

A good breeding female will fetch around £3,000, a very good one up to £11,000. They breed every year, starting as young as 16 months and are very good mothers who birth easily, and they live for up to 20 years. Male geldings are worth less, of course, at about £700. Each animal's annual fibre production is worth up to £250 depending on quality, and the MacHarg's are working on producing increasingly fine grades through breeding.

It comes as no surprise that there are some in the herd Jenny and Graham wouldn't part with for all the money in the world. "Like our first born, Hope," Jenny says. "And Katarina," Graham adds. And, to his wife: "I'd sell you before little Katarina."

Back in Scotland, when they first came across alpacas, it was love at first sight for Jenny and their daughter Rosie, now 15, but Graham wasn't so sure. Jenny made inquiries about buying three pregnant females with one (Spanish word for babies) at foot, but it was Graham who happened to answer the call. "He was speechless. They were £38,808. He said we could have 3,000 sheep for that," says Jenny. "And if someone had told me five years ago that my husband would now be chair of the thriving industry, I would have laughed. We were only after a few to have in the field, but they have just gelled with us."

What's more, this year they won the Scottish National Show at Salsburgh and got Supreme Show Champion with Fountains Katarina at the Northumberland County Show in May - now the biggest alpaca show covering the North of England and Scotland.

Alpacas, for those who don't know, look a bit like llamas, only smaller. Their history dates back around 5,000 years from the first time when the feisty llamas, used for carrying packs like its smaller relative the llama, was crossed with the wild vicuña. Those much smaller animals are still rounded up each year or two by the Peruvians who sell their fleeces for more than the price of gold to Italy, where it's made into suits worth tens of thousands of pounds.

Ullama fibre is rather coarse, but it has a high yield, and they come in lots of different colours. The alpaca inherited similar qualities. The most colour-diverse fibre-producing animal in the world, they come in 22 different shades from pure white through greys and chocolates to greys and deep blacks. But their fleeces are much finer and softer, and a good animal, to castrover.

"They say if you like dogs, then you'll like llamas, but if you like cats you'll like alpacas. They're quite aloof creatures; some are friendly, but in general they can take it or leave it," Jenny says.

They also spit, but more neatly at you. Graham assures me, although one of the older girls does it into the wind with her back to you and is rather a good shot, but it hasn't put the MacHarg's off.

While their Georgian home near the Cheviots in North Northumberland is possibly the most attractive building I've seen - a real country mansion, all very Price and Prejudice and with a fascinating history dating from the 15th Century - they're selling up and going in search of more space for the alpacas.

"We need more land. Here, we only have enough for the 60 animals we have, but we would like to breed more and could do with 180 acres," Jenny says. "Not that we'd ever get so big that we wouldn't know each of their personalities and their individual little ways intimately."

To be totally honest, before I went to meet them, I wasn't sure what I'd make of the Alpaca People, as I'd come to think of them beforehand. I'd tried several times to get up there, but they were always frantically busy with shows and their equivalent of knitting and all the rest of it, and they just seemed so serene. They tell me their social circle has narrowed as a result of their all-consuming passion, and that their dinner party chat is now on a par with combine harvester talks in the boring states.

I'm not necessarily a cat person myself, but the alpaca herd is lovely to look at - the friendly ones are very sweet, and Jenny's clothing range is to die for. Alas, my clumsy mental arithmetic tells me they're not all that bad a business proposition. "I do feel that some of your readers are the kind of people looking for a lifestyle change," Jenny says. "A lot of people do take early retirement, and you can run a herd as a little business."

I leave with great respect for their new life, for their openness about it all and their eagerness to share it, pondering over how wonderful it must be to find that great passion. And doing a few more mental sums ...

For further details of the Alpaca herd, to view their products, or for a history of the MacHarg's home, Fountains Towers, see [www.lowlberry-alpacas.com](http://www.lowlberry-alpacas.com) ■

#### EACH PIECE COMES WITH A LITTLE TAG SHOWING THE ALPACA WHOSE FIBRE IT WAS MADE FROM ...

