

Living The Dream

by **Rodger Matthews**

Walkers using the footpath from Kirkham Priory to Howsham who decide to leave the languid River Derwent may be greeted by the attentive stares of a herd of Alpacas.

These attractive creatures are more commonly found in South America and Australia, so it is something of a surprise to come across them in the Howardian hills near Malton. The Alpacas belong to Jenny and Graham MacHarg and form one of the largest breeding herds in the county.



The remote but beautiful location of Crambe Grange nestled on the hillside overlooking the river is an ideal spot for the development of their interests. The business has three facets, breeding and the sale of stock, the sale of manufactured alpaca goods and providing residential and day courses for those wishing to own alpacas. The MacHargs have been in Yorkshire since 2008 having moved from Northumberland. "As a family we had been holidaying in York. We liked the people, and the history and particularly York Minster so when we decided to move from Northumberland, a farm in North Yorkshire and somewhere in close proximity to York was our first choice."

"Our interest in alpacas began in Scotland, we were visiting family on the North West coast who had inherited a herd and we immediately fell in love with them" said Jenny. "At first we decided to buy some, purely as pets, but things developed from there. We were not farmers. Since arriving here in Yorkshire the MacHargs have been able to increase the size of their herd to 85. It matters to them that every animal is known to them and they admit that the limitation on the ultimate size of the herd will be determined by their ability to recognise each individual."



"We select our animals primarily for their superior fleece, excellent conformation and colour which may be white, black, grey, browns and various colours of fawn. Our crias have genetics drawn from the very best bloodlines currently available worldwide and our herd sires have won multiple show championships." says Jenny.

As the animals like routine they have to be fed their mineral supplement each morning. The animals have to be checked over, any hay replenished and of course mucked out if they have been indoors. The winter icy weather brings addition problems as the alpacas are unaware of how to break the ice. The ice which forms in the night in their natural habitat in the Andes is quickly melted away by the high temperatures.

"Because we know the animals individually we can quickly tell whether any of them are unwell." said Jenny "Fortunately it is not as time consuming as it sounds as they are the sort of animal that prefers less handling. It is true to say that they do not seek human contact. The breeding season is however more time consuming as we can find ourselves involved in matings, pregnancy diagnosis, and hopefully lots of births.



"We have had lessons to learn along the way." admits Jenny "Like all animals they have their problems and many vets have little or no knowledge of Alpacas. Now with nine years experience we are able to overcome many problems. In fact we look back and realise that if we had known then what we know now we could have saved cria (baby alpaca) that we were not able to in the past." As the animals become more popular and with over 30,000 alpacas in the UK, experience is being gained by all concerned. Many breeders now share their problems and Graham has recently been helping a breeder in Scotland who had problems with a premature cria. The breeder travelled from Scotland and took a supply of Alpaca plasma back to support the baby until it could start feeding from it's dam.

Such is the nature of the animal that they are capable of providing their humorous moments Jenny relates how the alpaca has a huge vocal range from a low rumbling hum to a high pitched shrill alarm call. "On one occasion, Biscuit our eldest dam had been housed inside to keep an injured animal company. When it was time to release the two into the field we brought the whole herd to them to 'pick them up' and take them out. The previously injured animal ran out with the rest of the herd but not Biscuit who had decided that she preferred it indoors. She stood in the doorway and began to hum and immediately her four daughters stopped, turned around and came back to her, finally leading her out into the field with the others. There is no doubt they are intelligent animals that have strong family ties."



The MacHargs appear totally engrossed with their animals and have no regrets at leaving their previous home behind. Fortunately they both share the same avid interest in the animals although Jenny points out, "when we were starting out Graham flinched a little when he found out that he could buy a hundred sheep for the same price as three female alpacas with three female cria at foot"

They suggest that anyone could keep alpacas. The minimum requirements would be a horse shelter to protect them from the worst of the weather. As they live a long time it is important that anyone thinking of buying should have a long term commitment.

Jenny and Graham are able to provide training through courses in their purpose built training centre on the farm. The courses are very popular and cover a wide range of subjects, valuable to those who are merely interested or are thinking seriously of becoming alpaca owners.

A valuable bi-product from the Alpacas is the fleece that they produce. Surprisingly the manufacture of alpaca goods would not have been possible without the skills of Sir Titus Salt who showed in the 1830's, despite many others having failed, that it was possible to work alpaca fibres. Bradford is still a centre for weaving the yarns and cloths. Although similar to sheep's wool the wool from the alpaca is warmer and has no lanolin present making it hypo-allergenic. The natural fibre is very soft and glossy and naturally water repellent.



"We shear once a year, in May or June and produce up to 6.5 kilos of fleece per animal. The higher quality fleeces are used to produce yarn for single garments. All the fleece is organically processed before being sent to knitters situated as far afield as Devon and Scotland who produce a range of products from hats to gloves, scarves and ponchos."

The MacHargs are fully occupied with their alpacas. Lifestyle changes involving moving home has enabled them to pursue their passion for their animals. They are 'Living their Dream.'

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Megane5454@googlemail.com