

# IT'S A LONG WAY FROM THE ANDES

THEY were the crowd-pulling stars of this year's Northumberland County Show. Visitors formed long queues to take a closer look at the intriguing animals on display in their special marquee, including the six being exhibited by Jenny and Graham MacHarg.

Parents, pressed by their children to name the unusual creatures, mistakenly thought that they might be llamas — but were soon able to announce that they were in fact part of one of the county's first breeding herds of alpacas.

And if the MacHargs succeed in their pioneering stock-breeding enterprise these gentle, photogenic animals, once only found in the Andes, could soon become an attractive new feature in the Northumberland countryside.

I met the couple at their historic country house near Wooler on an action-packed late summer morning and it soon became clear that if sheer enthusiasm is the key to success, that outcome is a near certainty.

Minutes before my arrival, the latest addition to the Fowberry pedigree alpaca herd had just been born, and a delighted Jenny told me: "This is the 13th birth we have had this summer."

The baby (known as a *cria*) was already on its feet, unsteadily following mum around the 35 acres of parkland in front of Fowberry Tower, once the home of famous 18th century stockbreeder George Culley.

George and his brother Matthew were noted agriculturalists and progressive stockbreeders who introduced their Border Leicester sheep to the north of England and Scotland and ended their days as very wealthy men.

After moving into his son's house, George remarked that having started his working life driving a coal cart he was amazed to find himself "inhabiting a palace". There is no doubt that he would have been an enthusiastic supporter of the enterprise now under way at Fowberry.

As we walk around the park, Jenny points out and names the alpaca mothers, their year-old offspring, known as maidens, and this summer's youngsters sitting in groups in the shade of mature trees planted by the Culeys.



Jenny MacHarg holds a recent addition to the alpaca herd at Fowberry.

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## STEWART BONNEY visits a breeding herd of South American alpacas — near Wooler.

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Alpacas, I discover, give birth to one baby a year which usually weighs in at anything between 13 and 28 pounds. That day's arrival had a birth weight of 22 pounds and was, said Jenny, "a healthy, strong baby boy".

Apart from the natural protectiveness mothers showed for their very young offspring, the alpacas' inquisitive, gentle nature is soon apparent as they wander over to meet us and make it clear that they would like some attention and a friendly pat.

"Mothers can be protective," Jenny explained. "If a fox came in here the maidens and the mothers would give a high-pitched alarm call, and if the fox did not run off they would chase it away. They can spit out a liquid which is foul tasting and a fox would hate to get that in its face. There are a lot of foxes in the woodland around here, but since the alpacas arrived we have only seen three here in the park."

Although the MacHargs both had some experience with livestock and horse breeding, their involvement with alpacas came about unexpectedly three years ago when a family friend living in north-west Scotland was left a herd of alpacas in a relative's will. Jenny said: "My daughter Rosie and I went up to see them and that was it; we were transfixed."

After undertaking some rapid research into alpaca breeding, the MacHargs bought three pregnant females

with three cria at foot. Now, following this summer's 13 births, the Fowberry pedigree herd numbers 44. Jenny adds with relish: "if our three stud males do their stuff, we should have lots more babies next year."

Pointing out a maiden alpaca called Iquita, Jenny said: "We thought that she was the best we had bred so far, and this year she was judged Reserve Supreme Champion at the Northumberland County Show and Best Fleece in Show at the Scottish National Alpaca Show, so her successes were very encouraging for us. She's a sweet girl."

What show judges and breeders look for above all else is the quality of an animal's fleece but, as Jenny explained: "There's no point having a beautiful coat if it's not on a proper coathanger. A good alpaca must also have a sound conformation. Then, whether you like an animal with a clean or fluffy face, with long or short ears, is a matter of personal choice."

"The genetic code governing the colour of alpacas has never been cracked. There are 22 colours involving various hues of black, brown, fawn and grey, and you can be surprised when babies are born. One of this year's crias, a product of a white stud male and pale grey mother, was an eye-catching dark chocolate brown. It's a colour we have always wanted, and she has a lovely short face and a nice curly coat."

"White alpacas are very popular because their fleece tends to be finer, but we love all the colours and what we are trying to do is breed animals which will produce fine coloured fleeces."

And fleece production is now the MacHargs' next goal: 600 balls of high quality wool has been processed at a mini-mill from 120 pounds of Fowberry fleeces. Some will be supplied to hand-knitters in the area who will make jumpers from the high quality fibre which is in great demand in the fashion industry for its qualities as a strong fibre with the softness of cashmere.

Husband Graham has been busy in a nearby paddock discussing how to treat a cria with an ear infection with their local vet, a New Zealander who gained considerable knowledge of alpacas in his home country but had not expected to be called on to use it in Northumberland.

Graham said: "People often start off by buying two gelding alpacas, which is an economical way to see if you are going to like them. When they ask how big a shelter they should build for them we always tell them it should be gigantic, because a year or two down the line they will want to have half a dozen breeding females. They just capture your imagination."

"They are such laid-back animals. The plus points for

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*Above: alpacas Benita and three-week-old Jason rest under a tree in front of Fowberry Tower.*

*Right: Rocco was supreme champion at this year's Scottish National Alpaca Show.*

*Below: Fowberry's alpaca herd comes in many colours.*



me are: you don't eat them, they don't have a death wish like sheep, they come in all different shapes and sizes, and most importantly they all have individual characters.

"Now we can't imagine being without them. I can't think of a nicer animal to keep: you just can't get enough of them. Some nights we are out in the park until 11 o'clock checking on the babies. Even when we are sitting on the lawn or in the house, we have fun watching them through binoculars. They are just so entrancing."

Currently there are an estimated 15,000 alpacas in the UK. At present there are only a handful of breeders in the north of England and southern Scotland, but Graham is convinced that will change very soon. "I'm absolutely positive that alpacas are not a one-day wonder and will take off. Anyone with an acre or two of land can keep them, and for some Northumberland farmers they could provide a very useful alternative income. ●

\* For more information see: [www.fowberry-alpacas.com](http://www.fowberry-alpacas.com)