

Getting sorted

Caroline Trotter, Field Burcote Alpacas, gets down to business at a fibre workshop.

BELOW: Marilyn Wright demonstrates one method of hand carding fleece.

BOTTOM: Victoria Barrett uses the electric drum carder to card some fleece.



Living near to Silverstone, Northamptonshire, we are used to the 10 mile radius lockdown that accompanies the F1 Grand Prix every summer. Last year, however, I managed to escape to glorious Worcestershire to attend a fibre workshop at the kind invitation of Roger and Victoria Barrett of Simply Alpacas/Jasmine Alpacas.

On arrival, with cups of coffee in hand, myself and the other four students were introduced to Marilyn Wright, our first tutor. Marilyn demonstrated the different methods of hand preparing raw or washed fleece.

As some of those present were new to owning alpacas, we discussed how a fleece should be sorted as soon as it's off the animal. We carried out some basic grading, removing all the pieces of vegetable matter, second cuts and guard hairs.

We then turned our attention to the blanket – the area of best quality fleece from which samples for testing are usually taken. This black fleece was approximately 33 microns and we were surprised to note that the 'handle' was beautifully soft.

It was then time to turn our hands to one of the four methods of preparing the fleece for hand spinning – this is

called 'combing' or 'carding'. Health and safety representatives would have been horrified as all the combing equipment looked lethal – long, sharp metal teeth, spikes and prongs. However, we soon found out that we needed these tools to align as many of the individual fibres as possible.

Our tutor demonstrated two methods of carding – hand-carding using a manually operated drum carder and electric drum carding. The former has one main advantage – you don't need to go to the gym the day you use it!

Down to business

So we'd sorted, prepared and now we needed to spin the fleece.

Marilyn showed us two methods, the first using a drop spindle which is still favoured by Peruvian women (nearly all of their daughters can spin by the age of three). Fitting neatly into one hand, the drop spindle is highly portable and spinning can be done even while walking.

The demonstration then progressed onto using a treadle spinning wheel with a discussion on how the resulting yarn can be plied to create 2 ply, 3 ply, etc.

After a delicious lunch and a tour of the Jasmine herd, we returned to our very smart 'workshop' to get down and dirty – in this case, for most of us, it was 'down and wet'!

While some of the group tried their hand at spinning, using both methods, others volunteered for the felting. Victoria showed us some of the items that can be produced from shoe insoles to lovely felted scarves/shawls/bags.

With our hopes and aspirations high we tried for ourselves and unlike some of the *Blue Peter* projects, it really wasn't difficult to complete a finished article that was more than respectable for a 'first timer'!

All that was required was some carded fleece, hot and cold water, a template where necessary, soap, plenty of towels and some muscle power (another morning can be missed at the gym!).

An hour later we were admiring a felted soap, a handbag, a purse, a scarf and a felted design using the felting needles (more danger!) to apply the design.

Those spinning were given the yarn that they had spun which again looked very effective once it had been plied (the twist put in).

All in all, it was a thoroughly enjoyable day, meeting new alpaca owners, learning a new skill and sharing our love of alpaca fleece in extremely convivial surroundings.

