

Genesis Update

After the birth of my first four crias the realisation suddenly hit home that the land we owned could only sustain one more birthing year. It also dawned on me that I had landed myself in a situation which was going to be very difficult to adjust to.

I approached the local farmer to see if they would either sell or rent land to us, especially as the neighbouring field was 30 acres. Neither of these ideas were acceptable to him. To rent land further away was not an option for me as I would not have been able to settle with the alpacas out of my sight.

I felt I had three choices, one of which involved Robert and the other two purely me. These were, (a) I had to sell my alpacas as they were born; (b) stop breeding; or (c) the big one, we moved house and bought another with more land.

Options (a) & (b) were not really a solution because, if I went for (a) then I would never be able to see what my herd and breeding program was able to produce over a longer term. Option (b) was really a non starter because of the price I had already paid for each of my females, I would get no return on the investment. So it looked very much like option (c). But how would Robert take it, that was the question.

Now let me tell you about our home. This house was a dream home come true with 3.5 acres. We had a beautiful setting with an acre of mature garden consisting of its own island surrounding a 1000 year old moat. The house was a reconstructed barn with a wonderful high vaulted ceiling in the dining room, a lounge window and seating which overhung the moat so in the evening sunlight, as it dappled off the water, it reflected rainbow lights into the lounge.

The island lent itself to the many garden parties we held there, and in the evenings we would take a glass of wine or an aperitif and swing in the hammocks that we had strung between the trees. Half the island was a mature wood, and the other half was laid to lawn with a scattering of mature trees. A couple of bridges got you onto the island and off the other side into the field in which we had the male alpacas. The girls were in the field at the foot of the formal garden, and when we were working in it, they were let out to join us. The path of lavender was a delight to all of them as they rubbed their coats through it on their way up to the house.

This house was to be at least our penultimate home, we had both agreed there could be nothing better, but then alpacas came into my life.

I cogitated over this dilemma for some weeks, then got a map out and stuck a protractor into the area where Robert's business was and drew a circle out to

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where our home was. This gave me a starting point to see what sort of areas we might have to consider for Robert to do no more travelling than he already did.

You will note that I had already got into the mind set that I would be an alpaca farmer full time instead of the current situation of part-time with alpacas and full-time travelling.

I made contact with a few agents to see what was being offered. It soon became obvious that anything with land would have to be further east rather than south. I started to view some properties, but found it difficult because I had no idea what Robert's reaction would be.

On the way to a friend's wedding reception one day, I came out with the suggestion about moving house and buying a farm because..... Silence!

Nothing more was said on the matter for at least three weeks, then as suddenly, Robert simply said 'Why not? But you do the house hunting'. I was stunned, but not for long. My next reaction was excitement.

After some months of searching, we found our farm in Norfolk. But for us, it was not a simple house move, was it! Because this time we had animals, shelters and so much more to organise. Three lots of removal companies to organise. One experienced in the movement of livestock. One with a flat bed to move the shelter and the other for the house. They say one of the most stressful moments in life is moving house. Absolutely yes, but here we are in our wonderful 16th century oak beamed farmhouse in deepest mid Norfolk and love it very much, even though I sometimes hear an expletive from Robert and know he has bumped his head on the beams yet again.

The house also came with three very pretty holiday cottages which had an active booking record. This meant that at least this income would supplement the work I needed to spend on getting the fields fenced, grassed and more shelters on site.

But I was still having difficulty in justifying an income from full time alpaca farming. I simply could not see a way of making money out of being an alpaca farmer because at every which way I turned, nothing added up. In my opinion, people were getting into alpacas as an emotive thing and not many were making money. Not enough was known about the breed and its history.

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Robert asked me what I thought I should do, and I responded with, 'Go back to basics!' But where are the basics? Then it dawned on me. Where do alpacas originate from? Peru.

I started my search for somewhere in Peru where I could learn about all things alpaca. I then saw an advert for the International Alpaca Judges School in Peru starting 1st October 2001, and run by two very respected alpaca persons. Namely; Maggie Krieger and Dr Julio Sumar. What better credentials for a learning basis? Although I was not interested in becoming a judge, to be taught about alpacas through the eyes of a judge, how much more perfect could that be? Also it was a long course, not just two days but best part of four weeks. Eating, drinking, sleeping alpacas. Wonderful.

However when I applied in July there were no spaces left.

We then went on holiday with the family in August, and as was the norm Robert took his computer with him. One morning as he was going through the emails he told me there was one for me from Maggie. I read it and whooped up and down for joy. Two people had dropped out at the last moment and I was next on the list if I still wanted a place. Did I?! I emailed right back and said 'too right'. I could not get back home quick enough.

Once home all the arrangements had to be made in double quick time as I was due to depart end of September, with a return beginning of November.

What a fantastic course! The pity is that we still today, do not have an Alpaca Breed Standard. A standard allows you to form a picture in the mind of the ideal animal, be it a pig, goat, horse, cow or alpaca. One to work to. The absolutely perfect anything does not exist, but a breed standard allows everyone a goal at which to aim.

From my time in Peru, I now have my own Breed Standard. That picture which is with me constantly and has been etched into my brain. We saw and worked with the most wonderful alpacas yet to be seen in the western world. We also saw, to coin a phrase from a film title, 'the good, the bad, and the ugly'. None of which we would ever see in the western world. (More about this can be read in my article, 'Are we in a global industry?'). But most of all, I gained knowledge in those weeks which would have taken years to acquire back in England. I now knew my pathway forward to making a successful business in breeding alpacas, so moving house had been right.

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The results then arrived. I was top of the class. This put me onto the first rung of the ladder to becoming a Judge. But not just any Judge; an International Alpaca Judge.

I now had to apprentice to an already qualified IAJS Judge to gain my full wings. As the only shows run under IAJS rules were in America, this was where I was going to have to go. This was to be something else. Shows in the UK at that time consisted of no more than approximately 50 alpacas in a show. In the States we were looking at shows with 3-500 alpacas entered.

My 'short wings' allowed me to be a Judge at our small UK and European shows of up to 50 alpacas, and to be a Fleece judge.

So in the UK I have been Halter Judge at the Henley & Kent Shows in 2002 and one of the Halter Judges at East of England Show 2002 plus Fleece Judge at East of England 2002 show. I was also one of two Fleece Judges at a BAS National show in 2002.

I have been a Colour Checker at two of the large American shows in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and apprenticed with Julio Sumar at the IAJS Del Mar show in California March 2003.

In June 2003 I bought a white male huacaya from Peru. In November, Robert and I went to Arequipa, to the Alpaca Fiesta which is the largest Alpaca show in Peru, and where we saw my Macho take Champion in his class and then Reserve Grand Champion of the show. He finally arrived at my farm on 6th January 2005.

But then in June 2004 I had to face the dreadful reality of something that I had been deluding myself about since August 2003. So much was happening in my life. I had a training clinic booked for September '03 with a 3 week tour of the country. We were then off to Peru in November to the once every 3 years Fiesta. Robert had his 50th birthday to celebrate in March '04. April to July crias were being born. June and July we had alpaca shows to attend and more so I was the organiser for the first alpaca classes at the Royal Norfolk Show. How could life stop for me? But towards the end of June I had to face the truth. I saw my doctor on the Thursday and was with the specialist on the Friday. He managed to get all the necessary tests done on the same day and the dreaded words, 'you have a very large malignant tumour and it means a radical mastectomy'. I had cancer. No grey areas, just black and white. There, I had heard the words spoken.

They wanted to take me in the following Tuesday, but as the Royal Norfolk Show was only two weeks away, I talked my specialist into postponing the operation until

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after the show. So the Monday after the show ended on the Friday, I was in and done, as they say. But I went in on a high, taking a number of first rosettes and two Champions, and a Grand Champion with one of my boys.

My specialist was great throughout the whole ordeal. made me feel special, helped me laugh when I least felt like it. Helped me face facts without doom and gloom and this in turn enabled me to help my family accept the situation too.

Operation over, then came the dreaded results. My lymph glands were infected, so both chemotherapy and radiotherapy are without question the only route to take.

I would be lying if I said it had been no big thing. It was, and the memory still lingers, but for anyone who is faced with this and dreading it, I am able to tell it from the other side now, as so many other women can too. Being positive was so important to me. I tried to keep it from the outside world until I was ready to inform them. My family, and very close friends were the only people who knew initially and they all helped me with their love, laughter and total support. I just did not want to be anywhere near negative thoughts, words or deeds. The time I spent with my alpacas too was tremendous therapy and when I could not get to them I became frustrated.

In the beginning the chemo did not seem such a big deal, even after the second session when all my hair fell out. But after the 3rd session the tiredness started to stay with me and the 3 week roller coaster ride took its toll more and more. Frustration was biting hard. I could do nothing and more and more the family, especially Robert had to take over my daily chores, even to come down the stairs in the morning meant I had to sleep for an hour to recover. I was becoming annoyed and angry at my own inability to do things. I then became so depressed that I then went down with a bout of shingles. Time to give myself a good talking to. This was not me, I was not a whinger and worse I was being selfish to my family. An idea then hit me. I worked out a plan of things I could do so that the coming 8 months would not be wasted. I hit on the idea of making things with my fleece.

In my strongest week I would card my fleece, spin it in the second week and knit it up in my third and weakest week. I was so proud of the hats I made, and everyone had their Christmas stockings sorted. I was achieving something and that gave me a sense of worth through it all. Each hat came from a different alpaca so they each had a name too.

The end of February saw the last of my chemo, then it was a quick countdown and three weeks of daily radiotherapy, so I thought. However, what I was not prepared

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for was the 'after burn'. My thinking that it would all be over by the end of March actually meant that by the end of April the 'after burn' would start to ease.

What was keeping me focused by now was the wonderful news our youngest son announced to us all. His wedding to Paula, his long term fiancé. This was set for August, and they both wanted to hold it here at the farm.

We had such a wonderful day. Everything was perfect from start to finish and the setting, even though I say it myself, was idyllic. We had the drinks in the garden to the sounds of the jazz band with the photographer doing his bit as they do. The marquee was erected up by the barn for the wedding breakfast. The afternoon finished with a falconry display, which the alpacas found fascinating too, and the evening entertainment was music by an all round group and dancing in the barn, with a BBQ supper and late night fireworks to finish the day. I still did not have much hair, but it did not spoil a thing for any of us, and a good hat hid most of it anyway.

I tell this story, because someone out there has been through exactly the same sort of thing, or indeed someone else will go through a similar thing, so this is for them, to give them hope and to realise you are not alone, and there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

So you could say I hit the floor, then got up, and started running again, and that is the way I am still going. Through all of this, my alpacas kept me going too. My time spent with them, especially in the early weeks, was very valuable and very therapeutic.

In life there are always windows of opportunity, and they come in many guises. Alpacas, for me, came at just the right time in my life.