

Genesis of an Alpaca Breeder

July 1999 - January 2000: The beginnings ...

Once seen never forgotten! This is the phrase which captures the impression these beautiful animals had on me.

From first seeing an Alpaca in the UK, to taking delivery of my small herd actually took 6 months. Incredible I now think, so what took the time?

We have a couple of fields on which we had tried to develop meadows, leaving nature to do its thing and cutting two or three times per year to keep it tidy. But nature does not always do its 'thing' in quite the way you hope, even with a little subtle sowing of seeds and extra help. The fields were just another tie in an already very hectic life.

'Animals', someone said to us, 'that is what you need, a few goats or sheep, they'll soon keep the grass down'. We looked at each other, shrugged our shoulders and continued with the labour. Animals indeed, were under consideration, but neither goats nor sheep inspired us. Goats in our experience are good escapologists, and very hard in other areas of the garden if they escape their enclosure, and as for sheep!

I well remember watching a neighbour some years ago, who tried to recreate a little bit of his native New Zealand in his back field, and the antics he had at shearing time. Would have been good for 'Candid Camera'! I also remember the time when as a good neighbour, I found myself on 'sheep' duty. On looking out of the window one morning, I found to my utter dismay that one of his sheep was lying on its back with its four legs in the air. I remembered from my childhood in the country, that if this happens, then a sheep would not survive for long. I had, only moments before, been 'working out' in leotard and bare feet. In this mode of dress I leapt the dividing fence and raced to the recumbent animal. Feet squelching in the mud I hauled and hauled at the poor 'lamb' and once on its side literally bricked it up at the back so it would not roll again, and hurriedly returned the way I had come, to telephone the nearest farmer for help.

Response to this call was, 'I'll be round when I've had my breakfast'. Panic and fear made me return to the sheep to give him words of comfort. (I might add, that I am still dressed in the same manner). Eventually the farmer arrives with Landrover and trailer. He takes one look at the sheep and says, 'Oh its only Barney. I've lent him out to service the females, and it looks as if he's had too much of a good time, he'll be right as nine pins after a couple of days off.

So sheep were definitely out. Then one day we saw a couple of Alpacas in a small pen, at an exhibition. My husband did the talking and I did the cooing. As we walked away we resolved to look into these animals some more. We joined the two

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British Associations and I managed to get most of the back copies of the magazines, and read from cover to cover all issues. I then searched for reading material on the net. Found an American bookshop and purchased half a dozen books on Alpacas and Llamas. (One rarely comes without the other). Then I started to look into different breeders and went to see them and their animals.

The first three breeders encouraged us to have a couple of pregnant females and a couple of geldings. Logical we first thought, as we were told the geldings could be company for both sexes, but when I asked why they had been gelded, in my opinion, I did not receive any logical responses. In looking at the animals in question, they did not look in any way deformed in body, legs, mouth or undersized, (I had been doing my homework and knew what I should be looking for) so I was baffled. If the reason for gelding is to restrict breeding, then surely all you do is keep males and females separate! One response I did receive was that it improved their fleece and its growth. As a scientist and a man with little hair himself, Robert wondered on what scientific fact this statement was made.

Then we were told that after our 'girls' had given birth, we had to take them back to be re-bred. I had read that a female is receptive again up to twenty-one days after giving birth. This gave me concern. As the cria would have to accompany mum, this would mean that we would lose our babies at the most formative time of their life and miss out on the experience of their growth. It would also mean that they were in the hands of strangers for up to three months. I did not like this idea one little bit, and felt there had to be an alternative.

I must say I became a little despondent and it nearly put me off, but then Robert suggested I continued to look at other breeders, and thank goodness, I did not get quite the same response from all.

At first the only Alpacas I saw were Chilean. Then I saw the Peruvian! I was hooked immediately. Before I knew it I had selected four pregnant females and one young male. I spent best part of a day amongst the animals and stayed so long, that I even helped herd them in for the night.

I learnt different things from each of the breeders, but the one thing which was constant in my opinion, was that they were lovely animals to 'have and to hold'.

From now on my use of the singular person is intentional. Once we had jointly agreed Alpacas were the animals for our garden, in my head other thoughts started to formulate. I had fallen well and truly under their spell, and I had been thinking for a while about a change in my life. After raising three lovely children; and for

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the past 15 years helping my husband run his business, (spending most of this in an airport or on board an aeroplane, en route to some far distant part of the world, usually loaded down with luggage, computer and whatever else), I felt it was time to become totally selfish and do something which was just for me. The children had all grown up and had started their own branches of the family, so the time was ripe.

After finding my 'chosen' animals I learnt that I could not have them for at least three months. MAFF had decided on a further 3 months quarantine upon arrival into the UK, because of a suspected problem in Llamas. Which meant that I couldn't have my animals until the middle of December. My own Christmas present I told myself. So lots to do to keep me occupied, reading matter to digest and fields to prepare.

I ordered a field shelter. Had the fields fenced into paddocks. Had specimen trees planted to give the Alpacas future shade within the paddocks. Checked and stripped out any plants and shrubs within the hedgerows and main garden which might have an adverse affect on the Alpacas. Avidly read all the material I had on Alpacas and Llamas, and collected more from different web sites worldwide.

In my search for a method of handling the animals I first found a couple of methods through the listing from my American book supplier. But both left me quite cold. One more so than the other. Then I found someone called Marty McGee, and after receiving the videos of her work I realised I had found my technique.

December was now approaching, and my excitement was mounting. My arrival date of the shelter was first week in December. I then received a phone call to say my animals could not be with me until 7th January, so when I was told my field shelter could not be delivered until after the New Year I did not raise the roof.

However, into the New Year and I am told my shelter would be delivered on the 12th January. Which meant I had to put off delivery of my Alpacas until the 14th. Thus giving me two days, I thought, to get the shelter and hurdles in place, feed delivered and everything laid out properly.

Wednesday 12th came and went, with no response to numerous telephone calls, not a word. Thursday 13th came and again, no word all day, then finally at 16:30 my call was answered and I was told that they would be delivering my shelter to me at 07:00 hours on Friday 14th. Cutting it fine, just a touch don't you think!

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So the morning was frantic to say the least. Shelter deliverymen finally left by 10:30. Hay and straw was delivered at 12:30. Quick bed of straw laid in the shelter. Dry feed storage tubs in place and filled. Hay feeder filled. Water connected up. Feed bowls fitted, and Alpacas arrived at 13:30.

For all the rushing around I had been doing throughout the morning, when the back of the trailer was lowered, ever so calmly my 'famous five' walked quietly and peacefully down the ramp, took a look around and immediately started grazing. For the entire world as if they had been there all the time. Incredible!

The resilience of these animals! 15-16 months in quarantine and yet how gentle, how quiet and how calm they were. As I watched my 'beautiful 5', suddenly all the tension which had built up during the course of the morning simply faded away.....

So what has happened in the months since their arrival.....quite a lot - as you will see from my web site!