



Graeme Bethune is a farmer in north-east Scotland, and produces yarns from the fleece of his Cheviot and Castlemilk Moorit sheep



Adventures in farming

Graeme Bethune introduces himself as he begins his new series of columns about sheep farming and wool production



THE WORLD has changed. Suddenly and unexpectedly, much of the life we all had has been disrupted in a large and still evolving way. Things we never gave much note to are

suddenly, urgently requiring us all to think about them. Where do we get our yarn, and which yarn? How can I choose a yarn without getting up close and squishing it at a show? Where do the yarns we use come from, and can I still get them? Where and how are they made, what is the story behind those products, and is it a good one? Oh, and also, why was all the toilet roll made in China?

Now, I do not want to discuss world-changing events so much as to take the opportunity of this moment, this pause in our routine, to talk with you about those yarn choices. I can feel the sharpening of your attention: "Yarn, you say? Speak on." Yes, yarn. Specifically, British yarn from British sheep raised by British farmers, processed into the good stuff by mills in this country.

Quick digression. My series of articles about the world of yarn and sheep farming will not be an attack on 'foreign' yarns, but a positive advocacy of the superb quality and historic skills and methods used here

in Britain to make the best yarns for you, our lovely customers.

I propose to tell you how my yarn comes to be. I want to tell you the story of how I farm sheep, always making farming decisions to bring you the best wool and yarn that I can. There are many people in this country doing fantastic work in the farming and yarn trades, and many of them will act as I do. So, ask them: ask the people you source your yarn from about the methods they choose for their product.

A large part of the intent of these writings is to inform you of issues that are involved in farming sheep for yarn production. I urge you to take the small knowledge I offer to find out more about your own yarn purchases. Get more enjoyment by knowing more about how it comes to be. Feel better about your crafting by knowing your yarn's provenance; checking origin, ethical standards, environmental impact and so forth. When you wear a garment you have produced, feel a connection beyond the retail experience of buying the yarn. When you understand your yarn better, I think you will enjoy it even more.

So who am I to talk to you about this? What are my qualifications placing me in a leading position in any discussion of yarn production? Good questions. So, my name is Graeme and I am a sheep farmer.

Sounds like I just stood up at a meeting and declared my addiction. This is not so far off, because I spend an unreasonable amount of my life thinking about my sheepies and my farm; observing, planning, estimating and, upon occasion, getting to grips with and wrangling some sheepies.

I am not sure if a family history of keeping sheep is a qualification, but for what it's worth I come from a long line of crofters on my Dad's side. As a family we have crofted here in this area of north-east Scotland nearly continuously since the 1830s, with just a wee break when my dad moved away for work in the 1950s. I came home about 13 years ago and took up the running of the family croft, choosing sheep as my focus and not cows like many folks hereabouts. I just don't like beasties I cannot lift - I am big and strong, but with the best will in the world I canna lift a coo. So sheepies it was to be.

For the past three years I've been running a yarn business based on my sheepies' wool. The experiences, and the learning and passion I found over the past 13 years, are my qualifications, such as they are. They will inform how I discuss issues with you.

Until next time when I will talk about my sheep, stay safe, and happy crafting. ☺

Find out more about Graeme and his sheep and yarns at www.caithnessyarns.com

Next Month: Graeme discusses how he selects and breeds for fleece quality