

The best Cheviot fleeces are dense, strong and soft, with a tight crimp and a very ecru-looking colour



# Breeding matters

Graeme Bethune explains the importance of sheep breeding and selection for achieving excellent yarns



**I HAD** the realisation, a few of years ago, that wool had become the main crop on my farm, rather than meat. I had changed direction without thinking about it – but now I recognised

that all the choices I was making about the management of my sheep and farm were directly linked to improving fleece quality.

This change was a consequence of me founding Caithness Yarns, and getting ready to turn the wool from my non-pedigree North Country Cheviot sheep into yarn. I had good fleece, sure, but improving that quality was as natural an action as any I have ever done in farming.

When I started to think about making yarn, I leant into the best qualities of the fleece: strength of fibre with a tight crimp, softness in the good parts of the fleece, and a very ecru-looking wool. I chose only the sheep with the best of these characteristics, or 'skins', aiming for their lambs to inherit those qualities. 'Skin' is a term that covers the fleece quality of sheep. Good Cheviot fleece should be dense, strong and soft, with little or no hair and a tight crimp. It should not break down to the actual skin, letting the rain and snow at the animal's body. So these are the characteristics of Cheviot fleece I wanted to improve.

I took a hard decision: I culled ewes from the flock. It might sound callous, but this is farming – if animals are not doing what you need them to do, sell them on to someone who wants them for what they are. I sold about 30% of my flock, removing sheep whose fleece was not good enough. Some were hairy, some shed their wool after lambing; individually, they had been fine sheep for giving me lambs, but now I needed my sheep to give me quality fleece.

I discussed this with my mum, dad and my 'sheep sensei', Donnie, and all three told me about when my grandad's generation 'improved' their Cheviots in the early 1960s by crossing them with Border Leicesters. They suggested developing a new 'improved' crossed Cheviot to diversify the kind of yarns I could make.

I decided to develop the fleece to widen the range of undyed, unbleached, naturally coloured yarns I was selling. I decided to diversify the look and feel of such yarns, making them softer with a different 'feel' and a new variant of natural white ecru. I looked widely at what was available as possible crossing options, and then I went with Aberfields.

This new breed was developed from Bluefaced Leicesters and Texels, specifically for crossing on to sheep like mine. The Aberfields have a longer loose fleece that's very soft and lustrous. I looked my friends'

Aberfields crossed with Cheviots, and was impressed: their lambs showed the length and lustre of the Leicester added to the strength and tight crimp of the Cheviots. My friends were selecting for meat, but I saw in their lambs a fleece that I wanted. One more point: I am continuing a pure Cheviot base, buying in the best-skinned ewes I can afford; they will continue to be bred with an Aberfield boy, while giving me great Cheviot fleece for Caithness Yarns.

Two years later, my first improved crossed lambs are now adults and about to breed for the first time. Their fleece is wonderful – longer and softer, still strong with good crimp, and with a pearly lustre which comes from the Leicester – and I could not be happier. Covid-19 has interrupted the launch of this new yarn, but the breeding programme continues.

This year will start the next stage in my breeding programme. The new cross-breed sheep will be bred back onto a Cheviot boy with great 'skin', to return Cheviot as the dominant lineage of the sheepies, but with a richer, longer, lustrous fleece quality. That is the plan, anyway. In the spring, when I see the lambs, I should know if four years of scheming and selective breeding has succeeded. 🍷

Find out more about Graeme and his sheep and yarns at [www.caithnessyarns.com](http://www.caithnessyarns.com)

*Next Month: Graeme debates the topic of ethics and morality in yarn production*