

A  
week in the  
life of...

# Freda Pilkington



As told to **Shannon Denny**

**B**ased in the shadow of Pendle Hill near Rimington in the Ribble Valley is Higher Gills Farm where sheep farmers, Freda Pilkington and her husband Darrell, keep a small flock of pedigree Teeswater sheep. Freda and Darrell have been raising

Teeswater, a rare breed originating from the Teesdale area of County Durham known and for its fine long stapled lustrous wool with a natural permanent curl, since the 1970s. They also own yarn company Teeswater Wools.

## MONDAY

Before we started to produce yarns for knitting, weaving and crafts, we already had a small flock of Teeswater sheep. From these we used to raise rams to cross with our Dalesbred sheep to produce Masham lambs as our commercial farming activity.

Our Teeswater lambs are born in spring but we have to wait until they're 16 months old to get that all-important long first clip. For the best quality fleece, we have to keep the sheep healthy and in good condition. For example, if grazing isn't of high quality, then we feed them supplements, particularly between November and May.

Feet have to be checked several times a year and trimmed if necessary, usually when we're doing routine dosing and vaccinating. We also have to keep the fleece on the sheep as clean as possible and free from vegetation contamination, which can be a big problem in spring when the grass starts to grow again. With such long curly strands, it's all too easy for the fleece of our flock to become matted. Today is a vaccination day so it's all hands on deck to maintain their medical fitness.

## TUESDAY

We attend about eight agricultural shows and sheep sales during the summer months. The sheep we take have to be prepared by trimming and dipping to enhance their appearance.

The fleece is sold as traditionally washed, washed and dyed. We also sell fleece as separated and selected locks. Washing after the fleece is sheared is incredibly time consuming, and separating the locks takes even more time on top of that.

Today I'm busy random dyeing the fleece and hanks, using synthetic dyes both by simmering on the hot plate and using microwave techniques. No two hanks are

alike. Once they're ready, these are banded with an identification code, photographed and added to the website.

## WEDNESDAY

The wool from our flock is fine, soft and silky. With a lustrous sheen and a micron count of 32 to 36. The first clip staple length is 12 to 16in and has permanent curls over the full length. People like to use it for decorative craftwork (such as long tail spinning, embellishing, collages, trimmings for felted garments) as well as for standard worsted hand spinning.

We have our yarn commercially spun because of the quantities involved. A new shipment arrives back with us in the form of several different grades of yarn: our 4ply Worsted comes in 100 gram hanks or 600 gram cones, while Double Knitting, Aran and Chunky arrive as beautiful 200 gram hanks. We use our own standard 4ply to send to the weaving mill, and this is used to produce our line of throws. From some of these I make cushions to match, and this is what I'm working on today.

## THURSDAY

To show off how the yarn looks when knitted up, we have friends who hand knit items for us, including hats, gloves and scarves. The star item is probably a sheep effect-cushion, which is knitted on back and has a springy, curly fleece on the front.

The majority of our sales are via our website. With orders coming in from the USA, Russia and all over Europe, this involves a lot of parcels and posting. We also sell our wool at several fibre events each year, normally Wonderwool, Woolfest, Masham Sheep Fair and this year Fibre-East, which is a new event.

Today we have what seems like millions of parcels to send, so I spend the day sorting

out yarn to make sure it arrives safely with knitters and crafters many miles away.

## FRIDAY

We have two self-catering apartments in a converted stable, and running this involves taking bookings, welcoming guests, then cleaning and changing all the bedding when guests leave. I spend the morning baking biscuits for new guests arriving in the apartments later today.

We'll get together with some of our four children and nine grandchildren this evening. Our youngest son Keith now runs the farm, which includes 35 suckler cows and 750 lambing sheep. He also fattens 1,000 store lambs over the winter months.

## SATURDAY

In the first Saturday of every month I attend the Bowland Guild of Spinners, Weavers and Dyers in Gisburn Village Hall, which is only 10 minutes away. We learn a lot from each other and have very informative speakers and demonstrations – and also a good chat.

## SUNDAY

Darrell and I were married at Bracewell church in 1960 and have been members and supporters ever since. After church we have friends around for a meal in the evening using our own fruit and veg from the garden. Afterwards we walk up into the wood to see a hide we've built to watch the badgers. Their sets are just across from the hide, so we can see the adults out and about in the darkness. We're looking forward to when we'll start seeing their offspring too.

For more information on Teeswater Wools visit [www.teeswaterwools.co.uk](http://www.teeswaterwools.co.uk) or call 01200 445370. ●



Barnhouse at Higher Gills Farm



Teeswater Gimmer Shearlings



2007, one of our Teeswater Hogs won top prize at the Great Yorkshire Show



wool - fleece



A basket of dyed fleece



Teeswater wool



later hand dyed wools...



... on show at FibreFest



Higher Gills Farm holiday accommodation