

Focus



**GOLDEN FLEECES:** Main picture, Ellie Stokeld with her rare breed Doulton Border Leicester sheep at Old Nunthorpe, near Stokesley. Above, skirting the fleeces with the help of Geoff Hansell. Left, feeding the lambs. PICTURES: TONY JOHNSON



# Shaun McKenna

## Living the dream

Sometimes you just have to laugh! The hairy ones and I were recently out for a walk, it wasn't a lovely sunny day by any means, in fact it

get yourself dodged out the way of the wave, but with the footpath being very slim and everything being in slow motion, there was no time at all for me or the hairy ones to shift ourselves or to take any sort of evasive action. It didn't end well.

I looked down at the dogs and surprisingly enough they appeared to have come out of the incident reasonably unscathed, which is probably because I acted like some great big lump between them and the wave, a lump which shielded them from this watery onslaught.

At that moment it all went quiet, which I've found often happens following these moments of calamity I find myself in and I stood

staring down at the water still running off the bottom of my jeans thinking, "Why me"!

I slowly squelched my way back home, with the dogs taking turns looking up at me with that look in their eyes

that said, why we heading home now dad, but all the while trying to stifle their sniggers at what they had just witnessed.

Soon, we were home and after Wendy's laughter had subsided I was able to sort out the dogs before unpeeling my soggy layers off before jumping into a wonderful hot shower.

As I made my way down the stairs afterwards my sense of smell suddenly sprung to life as I was greeted with heavenly smells from the kitchen as Wendy had been baking and before I knew it my watery walk became a distant memory.

One of the reasons for this may be the fact that she carries just a little too much timber and with that alongside her shorter legs it means she's closer to the ground and closer to all that muck and mess. After five minutes into the morning walk I had given up trying to dodge the puddles on the pavement or steer around the growing piles of soggy leaves, Elsa was sodden and that was that and so continued on our way regardless.

I am not a knitter or a spinner but I decided to give it a go and sent about 40 kilos of fleece to a company in Cornwall to be turned into yarn.

"It was quite frightening, not just due to the cost but whether anyone would want to work with my yarn."

However Ellie's fears were unfounded, the wool sold well and she didn't look back.

Three years later the yarn, which is now produced by Laxtons in Baildon from Ellie's rare breed sheep, has become a big success for the Doulton Flock. "We now sell all over the world with customers in Japan, New Zealand and all over Europe."

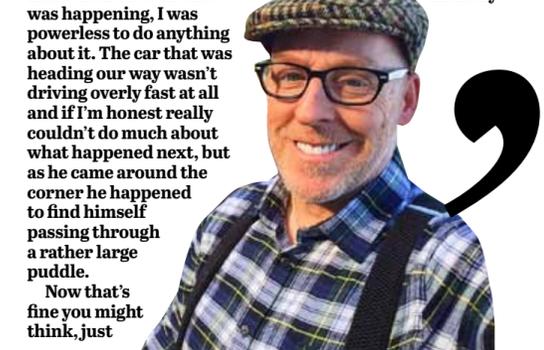
"People are concerned about air miles and animal welfare. Our flock is slaughter free and I have more than 300 sheep living very useful lives and helping to support themselves."

Although it wasn't raining, it had been bucketing down for hours before and so there were lots of puddles to dodge. In the two hairy members of the family, who were out with me, we have two differing examples of border terrier body types with one being slim and lean with slightly longer legs and the other being quite the opposite.

The leaner of the two, Boo, generally returns from even the wettest of walks in quite good shape other than needing a quick rub down with a towel, where Elsa on the other hand seems to have a coat that attracts any water, muck or unmentionable you could think of.

After five minutes into the morning walk I had given up trying to dodge the puddles.

Now that's fine you might think, just



**Sophie McCandlish**  
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A Yorkshire sheep breeder and conservationist has put her love of Border Leicesters down on paper, creating a book telling the history of the breed, its wool and patterns for cosy knits.

Ellie Stokeld, owns the Doulton Flock of Pedigree Border Leicesters, near Stokesley. Her ethos is 'no slaughter' and her love affair with Border Leicesters came about after a bad accident stopped her horse riding.

"I have always been a keen horse rider and I loved competing," Ellie said.

"I saved for a long time and bought some land to keep my horses on but I realised, eventually, I needed some

sheep on the land as well to keep it sweet.

"As fate would have it, the Blue Cross charity contacted me asking if I would take three sheep that had been found by walkers in a bad way. So we got Polly, an elderly ewe and her two cross bred lambs, Bubbles and Squeak."

Ellie said she learnt so much about sheep from her three rescue charges and although they lost Polly, Bubbles and Squeak were still part of the household when Ellie had a serious car accident travelling home from work one evening.

"I was coming home on the A1 and was near Ferrybridge when there was a queue of stationary traffic. I stopped but was hit by the van behind me.

"It sent me across the other side of the motorway, through the metal guards and down a gully.

"My car was written off and I wasn't in a good way."

Ellie was taken to Pontefract Hospital and the spinal injuries unit.

When she was assessed to go home, Ellie realised her accident meant the end of being able to ride.

"The doctors asked what I did with my horses and I said eventing. They

# Ellie's break for the Border

## Love affair with sheep breed reaps rewards

grimaced and said they would not recommend it but if I had a horse which did not jog I could have a gentle ride out occasionally."

Ellie said she was "devastated" by the news but also determined not to let it keep her down.

"I have never been one to be down for too long and I decided that I would maybe get myself a couple of pedigree lambs and have some fun showing them instead."

So she retired her horses and let them happily graze away while she started her new adventure with her sheep.

"I had quite a few friends who

knew about sheep and gave me advice on what breed I should go for and set me up to meet a lady sheep breeder at the East of England Show.

"But when we met up I realised that particular breed was going to be far too much work for me."

Ellie said she wandered up to the ring and sat down next to "a real old farmer".

"He was holding a really woolly sheep with a massive fleece and I asked him what breed he was and he told me he was a Border Leicester. I asked him what he was called and he said he didn't have a name so I called him Richard which made him laugh.

"I fell in love with the breed immediately and I asked him if he had any he could sell me. He didn't but said he was going to a sale in a few months and would buy me two ewe lambs."

Minnie and Martha duly arrived and Ellie said that turned into a bit of an experience.

"When I first went to get them they were in a stable and the minute I opened the door they flew up the walls, jumping as high as they could.

"It took a while to get them out of the box and then when I got them home I let them out in 20 acres. I then spent the next few days trying

to get near them again. Martha became quite friendly very quickly and I loved them so much."

The following year, Ellie decided to show her "girls" but said she had very little idea of where to start.

"I did what I thought was the right thing to prepare them.

"They had massive fleeces which looked rather dirty so I decided to wash them. I wasn't sure what to wash them with and then thought about Lux flakes which is what my mum washed woolly jumpers with.

"I got to bed about midnight having spent about four hours first trying to wash the suds out and then get rid of the excess water. They did have very white fleeces but looked like giant cotton wool balls."

But despite that and a lack of halter training, Martha took second place and Ellie said she learnt a very big lesson - that she needed to learn how to do things properly.

Ellie also decided her flock needed expanding and visited dispersal sales for new additions.

"It just grew and grew. I had the farm and I never sell any of them for slaughter, even my ram lambs."

She also found a mentor in Scot James Stobo, a well respected

### MOORS TO MILLS

■ Ellie's book, the story of the journey of wool, From Moors to Mills, combines the history of wool with information on the Doulton flock as well as knitting patterns.

■ The Doulton Flock yarn is available in a number of colours with colour packs reflecting places in Yorkshire.

■ Border Leicester Sheep are classed as rare breeds and are on the Rare Breed Survival Trust Watchlist.

■ The book and yarn is available from [doultonborderleicesteryarn.com](http://doultonborderleicesteryarn.com)

breeder who also worked with the cattle on the Queen Mother's Estate at the Castle of Mey.

"Jim invited me to go up to Scotland and take some sheep with me. He and his wife Pamela mentored me for around six or seven years. Without Jim's advice I would never have got anywhere."