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In PM47 Stuart Anderson wrote ‘A Bedtime Story’ about how he learnt to make a woollen duvet on a farm in France. Here he explains how the publication of his article has had unexpected, far-reaching results!

Val Grainger, her husband Pete and sons George, Bertie and Charlie, work their 3.6 hectare (9 acre) smallholding in Somerset plus an additional rented 9.3 hectares (23 acres). They have pedigree Dorset Down and Shetland sheep and also raise pigs and a few beef cattle from time to time. Val loves her life as a smallholder and is passionate about her sheep but has a problem that’s shared by many other

sheep farmers in Britain today. This problem – one requiring a permaculture solution – is that much of the wool produced by British sheep, despite its good quality, is next to worthless.

It costs around £2.50 on average to shear a sheep but Val can only sell that fleece to the Wool Marketing Board for just 50-60p per kg, with the average fleece weighing approximately 2-3kg. Apparently, in this strange world of global trade, about 70% of UK raw wool is exported, often to the Far East and China. Daft as it may seem, the UK

also manages to import about 70% of its manufactured woollen products back from the Far East and China. Ecologically, all this transportation makes no sense at all. The economics of it is



Left:
Stuart’s article in PM47 that inspired Val Grainger’s necessary diversification.



Right:
Val Grainger and friend.



a bit of a mystery to me as well, although I do understand that the aim is to move the manufacturing base to where the labour is cheapest. These crude economics ignore the negative social and ecological costs that are implicated in this arrangement. Additionally, farm animal welfare standards in Britain are relatively very good and so even non-organic wool is unlikely to contain residues of organo-phosphates, whereas the same cannot always be said for non-EU countries.

A permaculture approach would involve adding value to this output and creating local links to facilitate processing and marketing. Val already has most of her wool spun into skeins of knitting wool by a nearby processing plant, after which she hand dyes them naturally with such things as madder, nettles, bracken and weld. She also has her lambs butchered locally and sends all of the skins to one of Britain's three remaining tanneries that will still tan a skin with fleece on, fortunately situated just 14 miles (23km) away in Bridgwater. Caught in the same bind described above, other local smallholders and sheep farmers from Somerset, Devon and Dorset are already asking her if she will take their wool for processing as they are desperate to be able to do something with their fleeces; particularly fine white or rare breed coloured fleeces, which if sent to the Wool Marketing Board often command less than 20p per kg!

The findings of a survey by the recently formed Blackdown Hills Natural Fibres are very telling. For many producers, it costs a lot more to shear their animals than the possible return and so many were burying, burning or otherwise disposing of what should surely be a valuable output. The vast majority are thus very keen to see some local processing and possibly some co-operative ventures to add value, and thereby sell fleece at a profit.

They are also interested in new and alternative possibilities for the wool. This is where the idea to manufacture pure wool quilts comes in.

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In May of this year Val featured on BBC Radio Devon's breakfast show and talked about the plans and aspirations of the Blackdown Hills National Fibres Group. She mentioned that she'd heard of a woman farmer in France who made organic woollen duvets but didn't know any more. After the show, a *PM* reader from North Devon contacted Val to tell her that the then current issue had an article (*PM*47, 'A Bedtime Story') about that very same French sheep farmer. She passed on my contact details and arranged for Val to be sent a copy of the magazine.



These woollen duvets offer a great natural alternative to feather duvets, especially useful to those with allergies, and Val cannot find anybody else currently producing them on a small local scale with British wool in the UK. Thanks to the *PM* reader who phoned in, Val has contacted the French farmer, Catherine Guillot, and will travel to France later this year to do a course with her. Val has also helped the Somerset Rural Women's Network to obtain a DEFRA grant of £18,000 to set up a social enterprise project to produce woollen duvets locally.

Another cunning idea of Val's is the manufacture of woollen hanging basket liners. This would be an ideal use for excess coloured wool, once felted, and with a biodegradable waterproof backing. She is also – and this is the bit I most enjoy – considering the possibility of including the dirty bit's trimmed from a sheep's nether regions,

known as 'dags' as dried slow-release fertiliser for the hanging baskets. All the contents of the hanging basket including the liner could just be added to the compost at the end of the year.

So from the current desperate state of affairs like slim margins for both producers of wool in Britain and factory workers on the other side of the world, and the unnecessary moving of wool around the globe, the application of permaculture principles has provided solutions. These have the potential to not only find ways of marketing good quality wool locally for a viable price but also find a use for the crappy bits at the back-end that normally get thrown away!

Val runs courses associated with her business, such as smallholding for beginners, wool dyeing, peg loom rug making and hedge-laying courses for ladies. She is a qualified Lantra instructor (Lantra is the Sector Skills Council for the environmental and land-based sector in the UK). They have several acres of ancient woodland and Val's husband Pete runs a countryside management and tree surgery business. He is also a green woodworker and teaches hedgelaying courses. Val is hoping to host a Full Permaculture Design course at her smallholding, which will give her the opportunity to do the course while still attending to her duties 🌍

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