

Dancing with Sheep – An Introduction to Sheep Shearing

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People have been harvesting wool from sheep for thousands of years. Primitive breeds of sheep such as the Soay still shed their fleece naturally. Selective breeding over the years has removed this trait in order to maximise wool yield. Since many sheep can no longer shed their fleece, we have to give them a hand by shearing them.

The aim of sheep shearing is to clip (cut) the fleece as close to the skin as possible, in order to harvest the maximum amount of wool without cutting the animal. When the shearer clips the wool above skin level the usable staple is shortened. If the shearer goes back to remove the wool left on, it creates a 'second cut'. The fleece is then contaminated by these short bits of fibre. A good shearer cuts close to the skin first time without cutting the sheep.

People always ask if shearing hurts the sheep. The cutting of the fleece is no different from us having a haircut or shave. The sheep's comfort and safety is a priority during shearing. An uncomfortable sheep will fight the shearer, wasting both time and energy. A comfortable sheep will generally relax, making the process easier for both animal and shearer.

For thousands of years sheep were 'blade shorn' using hand shears. This is a very simple tool, the design of which has barely changed in centuries. Today many sheep around the world are still shorn this way, especially in Africa and parts of New Zealand. Blade shearing leaves a cover of around 10 mm of wool. Sheep living up mountains in some areas of New Zealand, for instance, need this wool for weather protection. In other parts of the world sheep are blade shorn as machine shearing is not cost-effective. The world's best competitive blade shearers come from South Africa and Lesotho, where blade shearing is a profession, not just a hobby.

*Traditional hand shears
on a blade shorn North
Ronaldsay fleece*



Shearing machines were developed in the late 1800s. The *Ringer's Review* reports: 'Frederick York Wolseley is credited as having been the first to invent and manufacture a mechanical device to remove the wool from sheep on a major scale'. The first mechanical shearing took place in 1888 at Louth, New South Wales, Australia. The handpiece of a shearing machine has a comb which runs over the sheep's skin and the wool feeds into the teeth of the comb. A cutter sits on top of the comb and whizzes from side to side across the comb; the wool is cut where the comb and cutter meet.

In 1835 in Australia, the first authenticated daily tally (the total number of sheep shorn in a single day) was established by Tome Merely who sheared 30 sheep in one day with hand shears. Then in 1892 Jackie Howe set a blades record which would not be bettered even by machine until 1950. Howe sheared an incredible 321 sheep in 7 hours 40 minutes. Many professional shearers today with their more advanced equipment would be proud of that tally.

Sheep shearing is like a complex dance where the placement of the shearer's body in relation to that of the sheep is precisely choreographed. The most common method of machine shearing is the Bowen technique, developed in the 1950s by brothers Godfrey and Ivan Bowen. This technique is a combination of footwork and a pattern of approximately 50 blows. A blow is one continuous movement of the handpiece along the sheep's body.



*Handpiece showing comb
and cutter in place
Photos: Lydia Hill*

Modern shearing machines run at a much higher number of strokes per minute than early machines, allowing the shearer to work faster. Also today's combs are wider, removing more wool with each blow. In 2010 male shearer Stacey Te Huia set an eight-hour record of 603 ewes in New Zealand, while in 2009 mother and daughter Margaret and Ingrid Baynes set a women's team record of 903 lambs in eight hours, also in New Zealand.

Sheep shearing is a seasonal job. However, many professional shearers shear all year round, travelling the world as the seasons change. The UK season is from May to July. In the UK larger flocks are shorn by teams of professional sheep shearers. The team usually comprises two or three shearers and a rouseabout or 'rousie', the person who rolls and packs the fleeces. Professional shearers are paid per sheep shorn. Shearers will be working at a daily tally of around 200 – 300 sheep, with some shearers managing much higher tallies. In the UK, professional shearers shear every day the sun shines; a seven day working week is not uncommon in the height of the season. It is inadvisable to shear wet sheep and few farmers in this country have the space to keep large flocks indoors, so there is pressure to get the job done while the weather holds. In Australia and New Zealand, where flocks are much bigger, there are purpose built shearing sheds and shearers have a standard working day of either 8 or 9 hours' actual shearing, broken down into two-hour runs with breaks in between.

Shearers need incredible levels of fitness and athleticism. An average commercial ewe in the UK will weigh 80 kg, with rams weighing in at around 120 kg. A shearer with a daily tally of 250 ewes will be handling 20,000 kg per day. There are few jobs left in this mechanised world that require such levels of strength and endurance.

I got into shearing by accident. I have always liked horses and a few years ago I decided to volunteer at the Working Horse Trust, a charity that aims to preserve the traditional heavy horse breeds. The Trust also kept some Southdown sheep as part of their grassland management. As a volunteer I had to take part in caring for the sheep. I had no idea what I was doing but I did enjoy assisting at lambing time. I thought I would help the charity by learning to shear so I could shear the small flock. I signed up for a course at Plumpton College, an agricultural college near Brighton, East Sussex.

I had never so much as turned a sheep over when I went on the course. Just turning over a sheep and dragging it out of the pen seemed impossible, never mind hanging on to it for long enough to actually shear the wriggling animal. Despite the pain, the dizziness and the feeling that my heart was going to burst I was hooked. The instructor, Phil Hart, said if I wanted more practice I could go shearing with him. However I was so awful at shearing he refused to let me loose on his customers' sheep, so I spent a season rolling wool, filling pens and generally learning a great deal about sheep. I have sheared a few sheep every season since. Over the last couple of years I have sheared 100 sheep each year, but my progress has been frustratingly slow. In order to learn you need to shear as many sheep as possible, my instructor says you learn on the first 500.

In order to shear larger numbers of sheep, you need to be fit and I simply was not strong enough and quickly became exhausted. Last October I decided the only thing to do was to join the gym and get fit. I have been training regularly ever since. It is a strange experience being the only woman in the weights room but the men would be even more puzzled if they knew what I am training for! I think of the weight in terms of sheep, so if I'm lifting 60 kg I think 'that's a Welsh Mountain ewe', now I need to aim for 80 kg, a North of England Mule ewe.

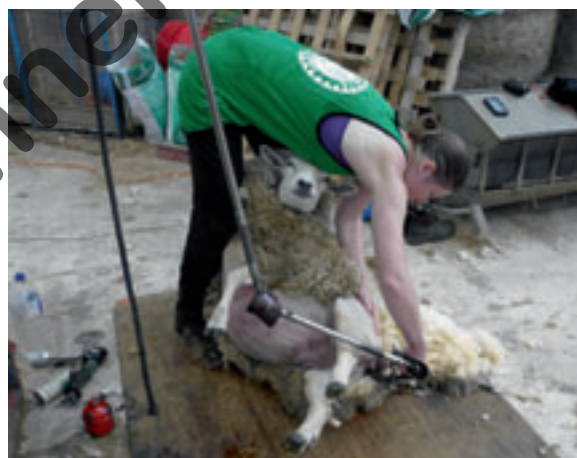
In the 2014 season I was privileged to spend a few days out shearing with a professional team of New Zealand shearers. Thanks to their endless patience and encouragement I learned a tremendous amount and went from a highest daily tally of 14 sheep to 38. In 2014 I sheared just over 200 sheep, doubling my 2013 tally. However, I am still very much an amateur.

In 2013 I became part of a committee organising a new sheep shearing competition – Southern Shears UK. The competition ran for the first time on 21 July 2013. In 2014 the competition was held on 13 July at Holmbush Farm, Faygate, West Sussex. Competitions are divided into classes according to skill level – the usual classifications are Junior, Intermediate, Senior and Open. Juniors are generally professional shearers, and the standard can be high for someone new to shearing. To encourage new entrants to the skill, we introduced a Novice class for non-professional shearers. We also included a Ladies Class and a Blades Class.

Competitors are judged on both time and skill. A board judge stands over each competitor and counts all second cuts.



Lydia on the long blows



Above: Lydia opening up the first leg

Below: Lydia stepped up the neck
Photos: Phil Hart





Above: The Open Class at Southern Shears UK 2014

Below: Jolene Cutting, winner of the Ladies Class at Southern Shears UK 2014
Photos: Lydia Hill



The pen judge examines the shorn sheep for wool left on and skin cuts. The penalty points awarded by the judges are combined with time penalties, and the person with the overall lowest number of points wins. Depending on the number of entries in a class, competitors shear in heats to qualify for the semi-finals and finals. Sheep shearing competitions are incredibly exciting, rather like watching a horse race. Shouting on your favourite is encouraged!

The Open Class, sponsored by Wairere UK, was won by New Zealander Cam Hicks, who sheared 20 lambs in 18 minutes 3 seconds. Local shearer Malcolm Sweeney, placed fourth, won the Alan Kensett Cup for Cleanest Pen, a prize awarded to the shearer with the most neatly shorn sheep. Cam Hicks also won the Senior Class. Charlie Parry from Powys, Wales, won both the Junior and Intermediate classes. The Ladies Class was won by Jolene Cutting from Rye, East Sussex who has a personal best tally of 251 sheep. England Blades Shearing team member George Mudge won the Blades Class. The Novice Class was won by left-handed shearer Jack Mighall from Surrey; I was very happy with my second place in this class, shearing two ewes in 7 minutes 17 seconds.

If you feel inspired to learn how to shear sheep, courses are run in the UK by the British Wool Marketing Board. Details can be found on their website, address listed at the end of this article. Even if you don't feel that energetic, I would definitely recommend attending a shearing competition if you get the opportunity. Southern Shears UK welcomes spectators and there are other competitions listed on the British Wool Marketing Board website. It is a chance to appreciate the skill, hard work and dedication that goes into harvesting the wool we enjoy.

About the Author

Lydia Hill is a member of the Kent Guild of Spinners, Dyers and Weavers. She has been learning to shear for six years and holds a British Wool Marketing Board Bronze Seal Award in Sheep Shearing. She runs Shearer Girl Yarns. www.shearergirlyarns.co.uk

Websites (all accessed 2 April 2015)

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