

Crazy for crafts

In an ordinary back garden and single paddock near Kidderminster Kay Dalloway has created both a thriving smallholding and a successful fibre business – all while working full time for the NHS. **Helen Babbs** drops by to find out about her ventures

The road through Cookley in Worcestershire is lined with plain brick houses and bungalows set behind spacious front gardens. Everything is quiet and ordinary, except at one driveway where Kay Dalloway stands in wellies, hosing a large pile of white, curly sheep fleece with a pressure washer.

“Some people think that you have to treat fleece gently,” says Kay, getting straight to the point as she splashes through the puddles to turn off the water. “But I buy these fleeces from two local commercial farmers who have sandy, slightly orange soil and so the fleece come coloured!” She grins, tucking a strand of her own bright blonde hair behind her ear. “I bring it home, sort it a bit right here on the drive and then just wade in and wash the soil out with the hose.”

The rinsed fleece usually ends up in the kitchen where it is washed with very hot water and lots of Fairy Liquid. However, with the need to stay outdoors for social distancing, Kay carries her wet armful around into the back garden. Washing lines strung across the lawn droop under the weight of a rainbow of fleeces – some natural colours, some brightly dyed.

“The neighbours think I’m a bit mad, probably,” chuckles Kay. “But once the washed fleece is hanging out, all clean and scented with essential oils, they tell me that it’s really pretty to look at.”

Kay has always been “fibre-mad”.

“I grew up here in Cookley,” she says. “Mum taught me to knit and crochet. As a teenager, I knitted fuzzy mohair jumpers on huge needles to sell to my



ABOVE: A dresser bursts with coloured fibre

school friends. I realised that I wasn’t going to get a job doing that, though, so I decided to train as a nurse instead. I’ve never regretted that, but I kept on doing my crafts all the same.”

After 36 years with the NHS, first as a community nurse and then as a liaison nurse in Worcester helping patients with learning disabilities, Kay retired from nursing last year.

“It was great – now I could go full time on fibre,” she laughs.

WE COULD BE here to visit the garden, a picture-perfect span of lawn surrounded by colourful shrubbery and mature trees, but Kay follows the curving gravel path past a large wildlife pond where Koi carp flash golden-orange in the dark water. She reaches a wrought iron gate in a brick wall which she opens with a flourish.

“This is where my yarn business lives,” she chuckles. “Well, it’s everywhere, really – in the spare bedroom and in the garage and bits of fluff are on the sitting room floor – but the fibre sheds are through here.”

The beautiful planting continues, with swathes of flowering perennials lapping up against a large, perspex-roofed wooden building resembling a glassed-in car port.

“This is my ‘spinning pod’. And I’ve got it fixed up as a bit of a shop if Etsy customers want to call and collect.”

Inside, colourful fleece, hand-made felt shapes and chunky art yarns tumble in profusion from a white-painted Welsh dresser and wooden fruit boxes stacked as cube shelving against the walls. A couple of straight-backed chairs sit next to baskets of fleece and no less than six spinning wheels.

"I learned to spin in my 20s from an old lady in the village," says Kay. "We became really good friends. When she died she left me her yew spinning wheel, so that's special," she adds, pointing to a small, upright wheel.

Kay uses different wheels for different kinds of spinning: a sturdy, double-treadle wheel in a square stand for making chunky yarns; a small electric e-spinner for large batches of finer yarn.

"The e-spinner's great in the evenings, when I'm too tired to treadle. It's also easy to move if I want to work in the house."

An open sided lean-to, built on to the end of the 'pod' is Kay's "felt shed".

"I do wet felting here, on this big table," she explains of the place where there are more washing lines for drying the finished felt under cover if it's raining outside. Various examples of her small felted fleece rugs are draped over a

rocking chair, along with several peg loom rugs.

"I weave as well, both on a 1.5m wide peg loom my partner, Phil, made me and on an easy-warping Brinkley loom, which is designed and made by a local craftsman."

All of this fibre craft needs a lot of fleece, for which Kay steps across the gravel path to open the double doors of another large wooden shed.

"This one's the wool store," she explains, stepping back to allow a view of the entire interior. From concrete floor to wooden roof beams, this 10x20ft space is stacked full of woven plastic sacks and clear plastic storage boxes all bursting with fleece. "I've probably got about 40 fleeces in here at present: Romney, Cotswold, Teeswater, Manx Loaghtan..." Kay ponders. "Unwashed fleece goes in the sacks, and the rest in the boxes so that I can see what I've got. I label everything, but in the

BELOW:
A basket holds Kay's fleece and yarn



summer when I'm buying most of the fleece I can lose track a bit!"

KAY'S FIBRE SUPPLY isn't just bought in. She has 11 Angora goats, who live next door but one.

"They're all wethers, so they have nothing to do but eat lots and grow mohair!"

The goat paddock boasts a road gate, set in tall chain-link fencing for security, but Kay leads the way along her usual shortcut out of the garden and up the edge of the adjacent farm field. In only a minute, we reach a small gate at the head of the paddock and the goats are scrambling off a large trampoline to meet us.

"They love lounging on their trampoline," says Kay, as she pushes the gate open against a large goat with a curling white coat and tan horns.

"This is Clyde," she says, giving the animal in question an affectionate rub. "He's one of the first four angoras I got back in 2011. He was four then, so he's going on 13 now, but still growing lovely fleece. I actually began with four Pygmy goats in 2008, but since then I've added several groups of Angoras, including three grey ones – they're rare. They all get on with each other, but they tend to stick in age groups."

The long paddock is fenced into a series of successive strips and the goats follow as Kay opens each gate.

"There's not a lot of grazing in each section for eleven of them so they have hay – about a bale a day – to top it up, plus coarse mix and seaweed granules. I've got two big willow trees in the garden so they like the branches on those. Then there's someone in the village who has a 60ft long beech hedge. We are given seven big fabric skips of the hedge trimmings which the boys simply love – it's recycling at its best!"

Having a smallholding backing onto other people's gardens does pose challenges, especially a poisonous laurel hedge along part of the paddock boundary.

"It's well fenced, and we have this tall green netting to stop ▶

SNAP HAPPY

Kay Dalloway's smallholding also provides a base for her other hobby turned business – photography.

"I was selling my felted mohair wraps to professional photographers as props for baby portraits," she explains. "Then I helped out with several photoshoots, arranging the mohair and the

baby, and I thought 'I could do this!'"

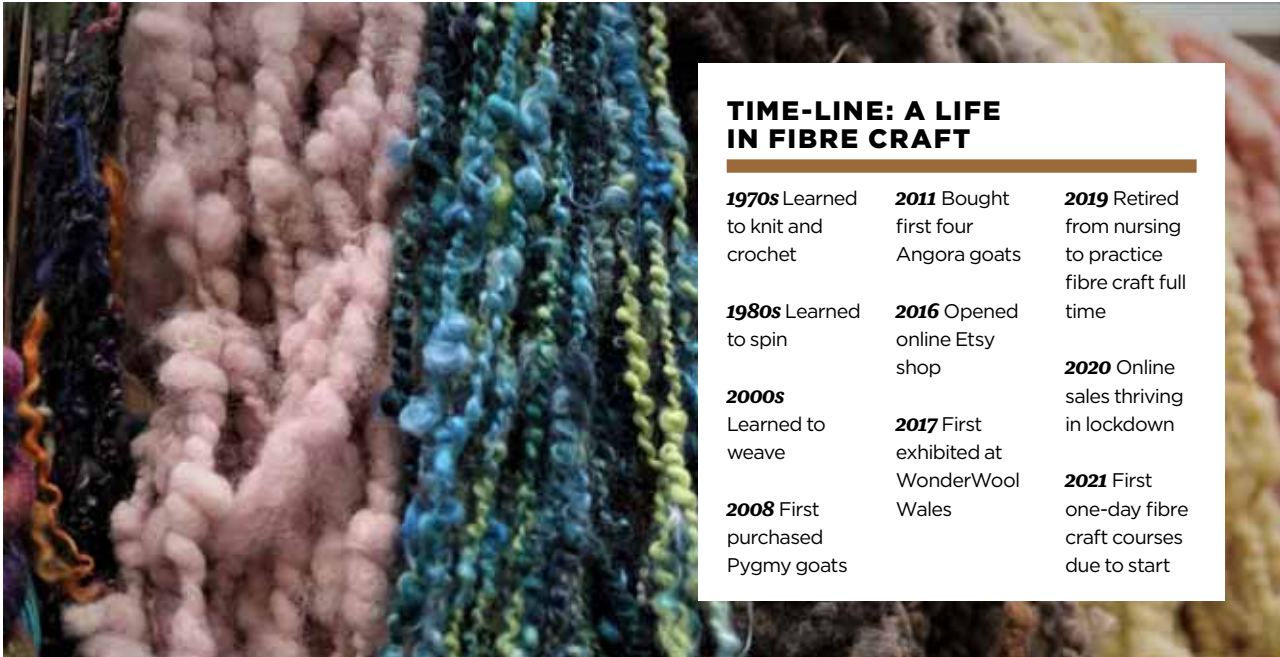
One of Kay's upstairs bedrooms has now been converted into a photographic studio complete with backdrops and lighting, but due to Covid regulations it is currently unusable.

"I'm using outside the hay store instead," she smiles. "I

open the doors back to give a nice backdrop of hay. I've got some rustic props, such as a tin bath and milk churn, and it's a great backdrop for the babies. Older children and parents love to see the goats, and the animals themselves often line up at the fence to watch the whole event!"

Big Smallholder Interview

From nurse to fibre provider



TIME-LINE: A LIFE IN FIBRE CRAFT

1970s Learned to knit and crochet	2011 Bought first four Angora goats	2019 Retired from nursing to practice fibre craft full time
1980s Learned to spin	2016 Opened online Etsy shop	2020 Online sales thriving in lockdown
2000s Learned to weave	2017 First exhibited at WonderWool Wales	2021 First one-day fibre craft courses due to start
2008 First purchased Pygmy goats		

any leaves falling in,” says Kay. “Everyone in the village loves the animals, but I don’t let the goats in the section by the road gate unless I’m here as people might try and feed them. Goats will eat anything, and they may die from it.”

The road end of the paddock has a small wooden hay shed, while two open sheds at the far end provide shelter for the goats.

“They dash in if it rains heavily, but in the summer they prefer to sleep out on the grass at night.”

In between is a separate enclosure for Kay’s two pigs, Portly and Patch. They were a bit of an accident: a friend in Kay’s regional branch of the British Angora Goat Society had bought two Kunekune pigs, one of which suddenly had eight piglets. Kay agreed to take two, but they appear to have been cross-breeds, as they are now pretty imposing.

TYPICALLY KAY’S DAY starts and finishes with preparing the goats’ meals, with fibre crafts in between.

“I’ve got time to do it in the daylight now I’m retired, which is absolute heaven,” she smiles. “I used to work 9am to 5pm five days a week. I had to get up early to feed the goats at 6am, and then I missed seeing them all day, and in winter I had to do everything by torchlight.”

Being at home has also made the twice-a-year shear easier. Kay shears them herself with hand shears but, when she was a nurse, she used to have to take a week’s holiday in March and September. “Now I just do one a day after breakfast until they’re all done,” says Kay, who uses a metal head-gate to hold the goats still. “It only takes 40 minutes. They just stand there, eat hay and cud a bit. It’s really relaxing. Then, when I let them out, they jump and bounce around, glad to be free of all that fleece.”

ABOVE:
Hand spun, chunky, textured art yarns

BELOW:
Kay Dalloway in her photographic studio



With daily walks for her spaniel and terrier to fit in too, Kay’s life is far from dull.

“I’ve never been so busy as I have since I retired. The yarn business is my own, so I can do as much or as little as I like. I started A Cookley Yarn on Etsy back in 2016, but sales have really taken off this year.”

For three years Kay has also been a part of the Crafty Goat Club, a quartet of fellow hand-spinners with angora goats who run a mohair stand at WonderWool Wales.

“Part of me fancies the classic ‘10-acres job’, but I don’t want so many animals that I can’t do anything else,” confesses Kay.

Her plans are based firmly in her smallholding. She would like to do more natural dyeing with plants grown in her garden. Next year, she plans to share a stand at WonderWool Wales with her friend Anna, to sell wool and mohair products. She also plans to start running craft courses.

“So many people ask if they can come spend a day with the goats and the fibre, I’m going to do one-day felt-making courses, and maybe some spinning tuition, too.” Surrounded by her goats, Kay smiles. “It’s busy, but it’s a nice way to live.” ■

For more information on Kay, visit Etsy: www.etsy.com/shop/ACookleyyarn; Facebook: [KDallowayphotography](https://www.facebook.com/KDallowayphotography/); Instagram: [@a_cookley_yarn_](https://www.instagram.com/a_cookley_yarn_)