

As the Whorl Spins

WONDERWOOL WALES 2017

Welsh Wool and Natural Fiber on the Mountainside

At the end of April, all handspinners and fiber lovers in the United Kingdom are encouraged to head to Wonderwool Wales at the Royal Welsh Showground in Builth Wells. Wonderwool is the earliest of the major British fiber festivals, timed to inspire spinners, weavers, felters, and dyers as they emerge from winter hibernation with their fiber stashes—and perhaps help replenish them. “We aim to celebrate the fun side of wool and fiber,” says Sarah Stacey, one of the organizers. This celebration fills three exhibition halls with over two hundred stands, selling everything from whole fleeces to finished sweaters—and even a pattern to spin and knit your own Welsh dragon!

Wonderwool began as a government-sponsored group exhibit of local wool and sheep breeds at the Royal Welsh spring agricultural show. When the sponsorship money ended four years later, three of the exhibitors, handspinner Sarah Stacey, needlefelter Olwen Veevers, and alpaca farmer Chrissie Menzies, were reluctant to stop. They banded together and set up a company to keep the show running as an independent event. Wonderwool is now in its twelfth year and attracts over five thousand visitors each year.

“The nice thing is that it attracts people from such a wide variety of places,” says Lynn Collinson of the Shetland Sheep Society. This includes not only the visitors but also the stallholders, who come from all corners of the British Isles, from Shetland to Cornwall and Suffolk to Snowdonia. With the show’s origins as a showcase for British sheep, it’s not surprising how many of the stands focus on rare-breed wool ranging from Boreray to Wensleydale. Some of this is even “on the hoof,” such as the Cotswold ewe and lamb brought by Wonderwool regular Rob Harvey-Long from his Pickwick Cotswold flock. The Pickwick wool, and that of some of the other exhibitors such as Garthenor, supplied samples for Deborah Robson and Carol Ekarius’s *Fleece and Fiber Sourcebook*.

The ethos is very much hands-on, “to let people feel the fiber.” Alongside the fleeces, prepared wool, and yarns is a wide range of equipment to get your hands



Photos by Helen Babbs

Above: Handspun, handknitted sheep tea cozies. Above right: A crowd at the Shetland Sheep Society display. Right: Pedigree ewes from Home Farm Wensleydales

working, from knitting needles to drop spindles and even hand-turned spinning wheels made

from individually sourced Welsh hardwoods. This could be just a giant fiber craft market, but what makes Wonderwool special is the camaraderie, as stallholders and visitors alike agree. Alice Elsworth of Whistlebare Wensleydales travels each year from the English-Scottish border, looking forward to “having people come back and show what they’ve knitted with our wool.” To help people join in this knit-together creative spirit, a series of craft workshops runs throughout the weekend. If you prefer to work on your own project, there’s a Ravelry Knitalong scheduled in the middle of each day so you can sit down and catch up with friends while fiber crafting.

More information is available on the Wonderwool website. Even those who can’t come can enjoy links to all the exhibitors’ websites, many of whom do online and international sales. If you want to start the spring with a revel in all things fiber, enclosed in a small but dramatic bowl of Cambrian mountains, perhaps I’ll see you there.

—Helen Babbs

Wonderwool Wales 2017 will be held on April 22–23 at the Royal Welsh Showground, Llanelwedd, Builth Wells, Powys, United Kingdom. More information is available on the website, www.wonderwoolwales.co.uk.