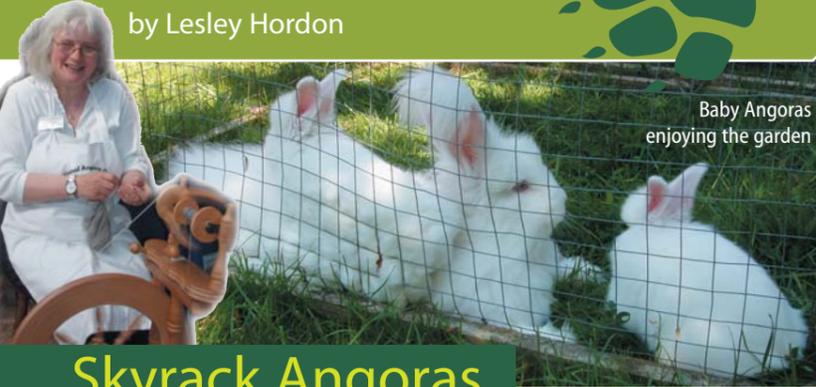


# Carbon Pawprints

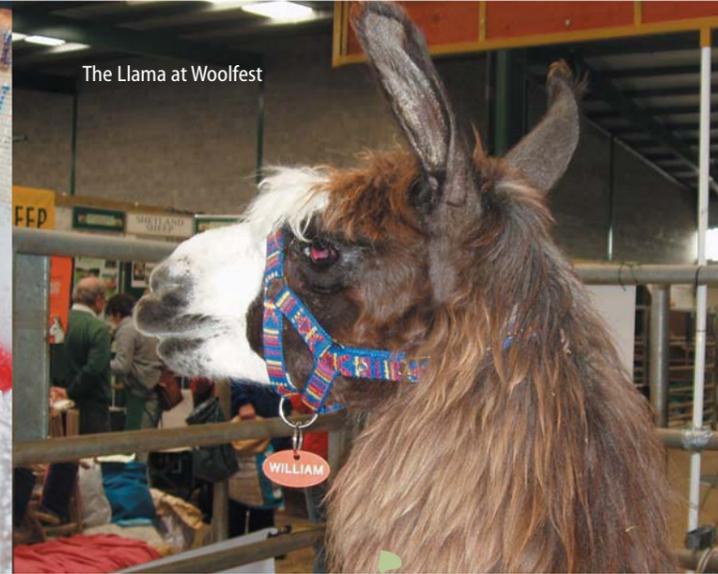
by Lesley Hordon



Baby Angoras enjoying the garden



Quail chicks trying to escape in the dining room



The Llama at Woolfest



2 alpacas

## Skyrack Angoras

It is difficult living the Good Life in the centre of Leeds. With only a medium sized suburban garden, a flock of sheep, free range hens and a field of fresh vegetables are somewhat out of reach. So when I moved here in 1996 (from a small suburban semi) I had to scale my self sufficiency dreams down a little.

I had already assembled my flat packed Ashford spinning wheel with the help of 3 children aged between 8 and 5 (it still has a wonky leg) and all I needed was a source of fibre. Fortunately I had been a BRC member as a Junior and rejoined, tracking down the National Angora Club, and soon my white wool producers were safely installed in outdoor hutches.

I might not have my country smallholding, but I had enough urban foxes to be grateful to my sheet metal worker father for hutches made out of spare oil rig material to keep out the unwanted visitors (who have worn a pathway across the lawn). Angoras are rabbits of fairly low IQ and I have seen a relaxed looking buck sniffing noses through the wire with one of the foxes.

Whilst the rabbits and foxes soon tolerated each other, urban dogs getting into the garden were far more of a hazard to the rabbits and I have had three occasions when the hutches have been damaged and the rabbits panicked by dog attacks, usually a pair of dogs let off the lead in a nearby park.

Sheet metal worker brother fixed that problem with Fort Knox style fencing and I was confident enough to take on a pair of Japanese laying quail, in a heavy duty fox proof pen (which takes the weight of 2 foxes, standing on the lid, with the expression of "where is the tin opener?" on their faces.)

The IQ of quail is even less than that of the average Angora, and it was not long before they too accepted the foxes as part of the furniture of the garden and the foxes now walk past both quail and Angora with no trouble from either side. We get an egg per quail hen per day from March to October, and being aviary birds rather than poultry, they cause fewer problems with urban byelaws. Free range, however, is out!

My white fibre producers produced copious amounts of another darker product which required disposal. The wheelie bin acquired a microchip and I started up a compost heap. Or two. Or three.

My husband quickly took these over as his own peculiar domain, complete with robin which perches nearby and takes a nosedive at anything red and wriggling.

It was not long before we became concerned that with our liberal production and spreading of compost that the level of our garden was rising and soon we would end upon a mound similar in height to that of the 14 cities of Troy. The suburban garden

is surrounded by 6 foot high privet with a giant beech tree in the neighbour's garden at the end of our back garden. We have dry shade (sometimes) in the summer and wet shade in the winter. The only sunny spot is the tarmac covered drive.

Then Mr Johnson's rabbit mix started coming in plastic sacks, and we developed our growing system. Empty sacks were filled up to 2/3 full with compost, and 4 Picasso potatoes planted per sack in the drive.

As the potatoes grew, they were "earthed" by the sacks being topped up with compost. Harvest, in August, involved opening the kitchen door and pulling up a potato plant for a rummage around the roots for dinner. No digging, no weeding and surprisingly no problem with parasites or slugs.

For lettuce, the bags 2/3 full of compost were sealed with parcel tape, laid on their side and a window cut for sowing – a homemade grow bag, peat free. Again, despite last year's wet summer, there were few problems with slugs but that may have been due to the lettuce bags providing a haven for frogs!

Tomatoes were grown in plastic tubs of rabbit compost against the wall of the house in a £10 "grow bag" plastic greenhouse, dismantled in winter. Last summer was not a success for anyone's tomatoes, but we cut down the remaining branches of unripe tomatoes before the first frost, tied them together with baler twine and hung them upside down from

the top of the kitchen window inside, where they ripened remarkably well. We ate the last one at the beginning of January.

City children, however, take time to adjust to growing food and the first crop of potatoes was received rather badly ("we want potatoes from the supermarket not ones that have been in soil!")

The difficulties of getting a new boyfriend past the potatoes chitting in rows on the kitchen table without him seeing them were discussed in detail, my daughter eventually falling back on the explanation "my mother is a bit weird."

Fortunately we discovered that his mother kept her potatoes behind the sofa....

Homespun hats and scarves, however, were readily accepted and I began to get requests for accessories to match ("Do you like my new sheepskin coat? Can you get a Gold Angora?")

A pink Angora beret was more difficult and involved simmering large quantities of white wool in an old stockpot with a cocktail of dyeing ingredients, leading to heaps of shocking pink Angora drying on towels in the warmest room in the house. ("Why is there a dead flamingo on the bathroom floor?") At least the "my mother is a bit weird" explanation covered this problem too, along with that of the quail chicks in the portable incubator in the dining room!

Meanwhile the white wool producers were going to be shown - when they produced some babies! Limited for room, we started with just one buck and one doe, both of whom firmly refused to do what rabbits are renowned for. Does two and three were the same.

Doe number four managed a litter of 2. Eventually there were 9 rabbits, growing lovely wool, all apparently blessed with immortality and including only 2 fertile does! One Angora rabbit produces 2.5 oz good quality spinning wool per clip, 4 clips per year, nine rabbits... the wool mountain began to rival the compost mountain.

Then the National Angora Club had an invitation to Woolfest, the Cumbrian Fibre Festival, and the surplus wool was packed for sale. How to convince people that they really needed to buy Angora wool rather than that from llama, sheep, alpaca or even bison?

Spindles were made, free spinning lessons were offered at the stall and once the customers had learned to spin, they bought the spindle and the Angora wool to go with it. Or in the case of the teenage daughter of Buffalo Gold, the Texan bison ranch, Angora wool was traded for bison fibre and a free spinning lesson and spindle. We declined the offer of trading a rabbit for a bison!

Felting demonstrations and accompanying leaflets

gained more customers and the Club gained more members. Education was also important as it rapidly became apparent that although BRC members know Angora rabbits are clipped for wool, the general public don't, and we had to emphasize that no rabbits were harmed in the making of our shawls!

For those who wish for the complete and environmentally friendly hobby, the Angora rabbit has everything to offer.

Companionship both of rabbits and fellow Club members. Showing, the crafts of spinning, knitting, dyeing and felting (also weaving, lucet and nalbinding) together with recycling vegetable waste and wild greens into rabbit, wool and compost. Plus the production of home made garments both for use and Products competitions – and the bonus of home grown vegetables.

It is very pleasant sitting in a garden chair on a dry and sunny day with white (non show!) Angoras romping on the lawn in their pens, digging holes in the corners and refusing to mate, goldfinches and blue tits plucking wool from the sides of the pen for their nests and watching sacks of potatoes, tubs of tomatoes and bags of lettuce beginning to sprout whilst quietly knitting homespun hand dyed Angora wool.

Shame there was only one dry and sunny day, sometime in April, last year!



Lesley Hordon at her spinning wheel, Woolfest, with Chris Hamilton, Secretary of the National Angora

