



Spindle spinning

by Lesley Hordon



Spindle spun Angora products. Pink beret, smoke Shetland shawl, white booties and white shawl

THE ART of producing thread from fibre stretches into prehistory. Twenty thousand years ago Paleolithic men and women twisted plant and animal fibre into string, to be used in nets, cords and tools.

By Neolithic times, some 7000 years ago, someone had found a more efficient way of thread production by using a spindle to twist and store the yarn.

The Ancient Egyptians spun linen so fine in 3000 BC that it was woven at 200 threads to the inch, which cannot be replicated by today's machines.

By comparison the spinning wheel is a recent invention, with a mere 800 year history. No one knows its origin but some think that it came to Europe from China, reaching Britain in about 1280 AD.

Initially the Great Wheel or walking wheel was used with the user standing by it and turning the wheel with one hand whilst using the other hand to draw out the fleece attached to the pointed rotating spindle (the only type of spindle known to be sharp enough to inflict injury on Sleeping Beauty!)

The treadle was added in 1533 and the familiar wheel, beloved of the National Angora Club and seen at Bradford and London shows, was created.

This wheel is at the heart of many of our fairytales, the most appealing of which are the tales of Rumpelstiltskin (what BRC member wouldn't like the ability to spin straw into gold in these credit crunch times? No shortage of the raw material!) and that of the young girl who spun nettles into magic shirts and threw them over the heads of her swan-brothers to give them back their human forms. (Now I can spin nettles- but more of that later!)

The less attractive side of wheel spinning was illustrated in the Grimm's fairy tale of the three spinners who helped a princess complete an impossible spinning task. One had a huge lower lip, one a gigantic thumb and the last a massive foot.

When they turned up at the princess's wedding the prince asked why, and when he found out that this was from moistening the thread, drawing it out and treading the wheel, the princess, to her relief, was promptly forbidden to spin ever again!

The Industrial Revolution came in 1780 and spinning was mechanised. My ancestors as far back as 1830 worked in the woollen mills of Leeds, my grandmother, a spinner, going to the mill on the tram in 1916, crocheting shawls to occupy the long journey. She taught me to knit and crochet when I spent two years flat on my back in hospital between the ages of 7-9.

My introduction to spinning came when I was 12, with instructions for a spindle in the Girl Guide Handbook. My father spent 2 minutes converting a wooden ring stacking toy and I had my first spindle.

What I did not have was a sheep, so my fluffy Shetland sheepdog was plucked to provide my first "fleece". (Many types of dog hair spin well and I know a very successful poodle-spinner).

My grandmother was mystified (why do it the hard way?) but since then I have graduated to Angora, silk, alpaca, bamboo, yak, musk ox, bison, New Zealand possum and even recycled plastic milk bottle!

For a challenge I learnt to spin nettles. A Yorkshire person cannot resist free raw material and the field near my house is full of them. The fibre is produced from the stems after retting (rotting), drying and breaking and produces a thread similar to linen. The effort is considerable!

It is recorded that when the Germans ran out of cotton during the First World War they produced uniforms for soldiers from nettle fibre. Rather than me!

So why spin with a spindle? A wheel is four times as fast. Why did shepherds in the Peruvian Andes decline the offer of free spinning wheels?

The answer lies in lifestyle. A spindle can be twirled whilst watching a flock, a child or a boiling pot, walking to market with a load on the head or on the back of a donkey or llama.

Or in my case, for 10 minutes over a cup of coffee before work, for (considerably) longer on the telephone to my sister, whilst watching the Ten O'Clock News, or whilst reading a book.

A spindle can be tucked away in a pocket and pulled out by the side of a football pitch and equally

quickly be concealed when noticed by teenage son. (Spindle spinning may be part of daily life in the Andes but is not recommended at Sunday football in Leeds if I wished my son to speak to me ever again!)

My 4 double pointed knitting needles almost didn't make it through security at the Hull Ferry Port (try hijacking the Pride of Zeebrugge with a half knitted sock!) but a wooden spindle passes through airport security without comment.

Children can learn spindle spinning in ten minutes and indeed have done so at the National Angora Stand at Bradford Excel, Stafford and the Woolfest fibre festival.

Spindles are cheap, easy to make and can be designed easily in different sizes for different threads, from the tiny cotton spindle (bead whorl on bamboo skewer shaft) to the 3 foot long Navajo floor spindle spinning a heavy woollen yarn for traditional rugs.

The quality of yarn produced with a spindle is as good if not better, than wheel spun thread.

So, if your dog is a Doberman and your rabbit a Rex, do not despair! Wool tops are cheap, clean and easily available on the Internet and by mail order and come in natural or dyed shades.

Wool is easier than Angora to start with as the fibres are longer, and, because of the scales on the wool fibres, the spun thread holds together more readily. Follow the simple instructions right and become a 21st Century spindle spinner.



Two ply spindle spun skeins, from left to right alpaca/silk blend, merino/silk blend, bison, bamboo, blue Angora, dyed coral Angora

Making and Using a Hand Spindle

Materials

1. Length of 8mm or 9mm diameter wooden dowelling 25cm length, available from Homebase, B&Q or Hobbycraft
2. Wooden toy wheel 6cm diameter, available from Hobbycraft
3. Drill with 8mm or 9mm bit.
4. Ruler
5. Pencil sharpener with large hole (double pencil sharpeners with both small and large holes available from WH Smith)
6. Sharp pen knife or Stanley knife
7. Sandpaper

Method (Fig 1)

1. Cut dowelling to 25 cm length
2. Sharpen one end with large bore pencil sharpener
3. Enlarge hole at centre of toy wheel to diameter of dowelling using drill
4. Push dowelling through centre of wheel. This should fit snugly, but if loose a few drops of Evostik Wood Resin can be used to secure the wheel to the shaft. The wheel should be about 4 cm from the pointed end of the dowel.
5. Cut notch approximately 2.5cm from flat end of shaft and smooth with sandpaper.

To Spin

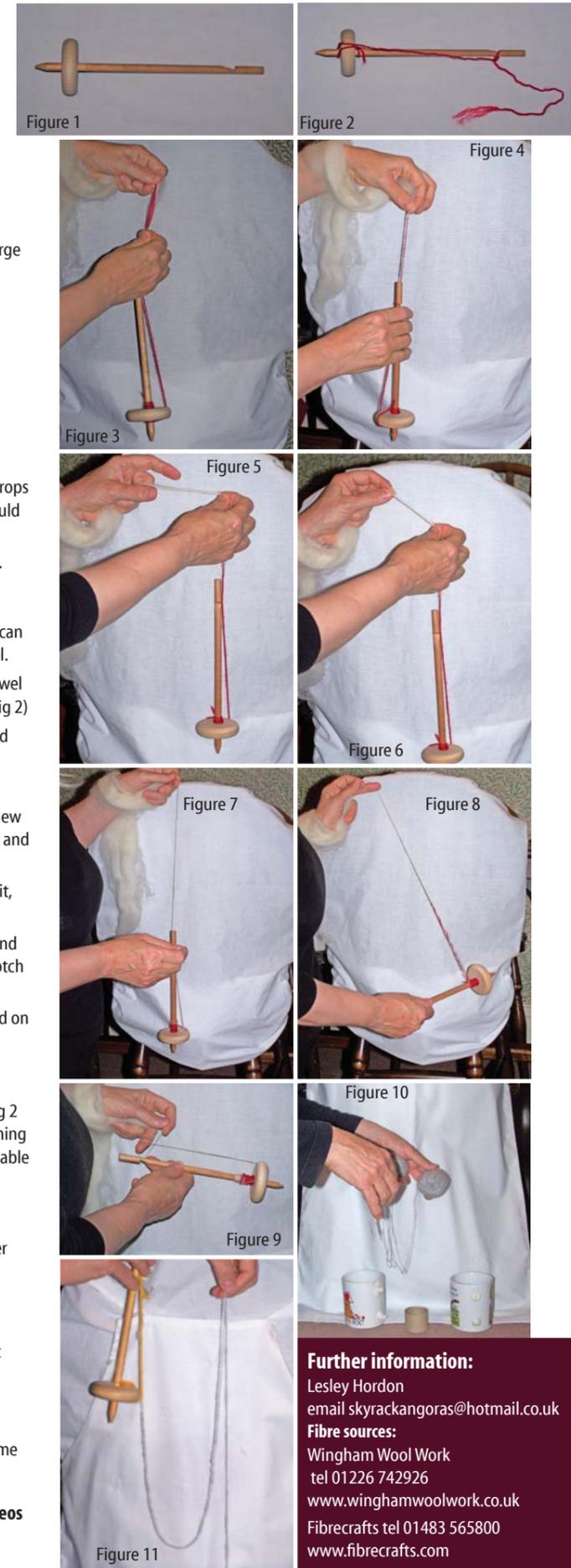
1. Attach leader thread to spindle shaft with a knot. (Fig 2) A length of knitting wool can be used to begin with. Fraying the free end makes it easier to join the unspun wool.
2. Pass thread around pointed end of dowel and up to notch. Loop thread around dowel at level of notch passing free end of thread under the thread going up the shaft (Fig 2)
3. Pull piece of wool from mass held in left hand. Overlap with the knitting thread and pinch. (Fig 3)
4. Let spindle hang free and twirl top of shaft clockwise. (Fig 4)
5. Pull more of the wool from left hand, pinch and twirl shaft clockwise again. If the new woollen thread starts to separate from the leader thread - cheat and knot the new and leader threads together!
6. The method of spinning is easy once started - PULL (Fig 5) the wool, PINCH (Fig 6) it, TWIRL (Fig 7) the spindle clockwise and repeat.
7. When the spindle almost reaches the ground, unhook the thread from the notch and wind the thread around the spindle shaft. (Fig 8) Hook the thread back over the notch and continue spinning. (Fig 9)
8. When the spindle is full unhook the thread and wind the thread off the spindle and on to a section of cardboard kitchen roll.

To ply

The thread produced so far is known as "singles". It is possible to knit with it but plying 2 singles together produces a balanced yarn. This is especially important when spinning with Angora, which needs a high twist to prevent it shedding, and so is unmanageable as a single.

1. Take 2 balls of single thread and put each into a mug standing on the floor.
2. Pull out a thread from each ball and knot the two threads together on to the leader thread (Fig 10)
3. Spin the threads together anticlockwise to ply.
4. When the thread is balanced it should hang in a neutral loop like this (Fig 11) Too much plying, the thread will twist clockwise, too little and the thread will twist anticlockwise. Twirl the spindle in the same direction that the thread is twisting to correct.
5. When the balls are plied, wind the thread off the spindle into a ball or into a skein. Any unplied singles thread left (it is rare to get two balls containing exactly the same length of thread) can be used as leader thread to start off the next spindle.

The Internet has a considerable amount of accessible information including videos on spindle spinning. "Google" spindle spinning or call in at the National Angora Club Stand at the Bradford Excel Show with your spindle if you have problems!



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