

MY AUSSIE ALPACA ODYSSEY.

PART 2

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At the beginning of January 2006, I had the unique opportunity to start work for three months on Flowerdale Estate in Australia – the home of Flowerdale Estate Alpacas. This is the continuation of the story.

In the first part of my story, I wrote about my stay here at Flowerdale, where I was involved in all aspects of animal husbandry as well as a new breeder's workshop which Flowerdale runs on a regular basis.

Since writing the first part of my story, life has continued to be extremely busy here at Flowerdale, starting with the Seymour Alternative Farming Expo on February 17 to 19. The event attracts over 35,000 visitors over 3 days. This was very similar to a large country show in the UK except that it is particularly focused on alternative farming options. Being one of the biggest shows of its type in Australia and only half an hour away, Flowerdale takes a display there every year. This year I was there to help out. Although there were alpacas at the show there was no judging of the animals, but that did nothing to deter us from being exhibitors. We had four alpacas at our display all weekend. There was a lot of interest in the animals. Many people were just curious about the alpacas but lots also wanted more information about the "Introduction to Alpacas" seminars at Flowerdale as well as using geldings as guards for sheep or chickens.

Training weanlings for a big show.

Things did not get any quieter after the Seymour Expo as we had to prepare for the Canberra Royal Show – and unlike Seymour,

this is a big show for judging animals. With two weeks to go until the show there were two junior females that needed halter training. When we started this they certainly seemed to be two of the liveliest animals on the farm! Following some helpful advice from Haydn, the farm manager, I always took the junior females, being trained, out one at a time with another, previously trained alpaca, leading the way. This gives confidence to the animal being trained and it significantly speeds the training process along. After training both these alpacas for fifteen minutes everyday, over two weeks, they walked quite happily with their halters on.

The two weeks passed quickly. Jeffry Farman and I left for Canberra early on the Friday morning of February 24th. Canberra is a seven hour drive from Flowerdale so we decided to split the journey up. So we did some sightseeing on the way. Our first stop was at a small town called Glenrowan, where Ned Kelly (a notorious Aussie outlaw in the 1870's) and his Gang staged their final shootout against the police forces. After looking around a small but fascinating museum on the life and times of Ned Kelly, we agreed to follow up this experience by planning to visit the Old Melbourne Jail where Ned Kelly was executed. Not only would it be fascinating to find out where Ned Kelly was imprisoned and later hanged, the history of Melbourne's crime and early prison systems would also be very interesting, particularly as many of the prisoners came from England and Ireland.

Dog topped by Alpacas.

Our next stop was near another small

town called Gundagai, famous for the statue of The Dog On The Tuckerbox which had seemingly been immortalized by a well known Australian song – hence it had become quite a tourist attraction. It was fairly quiet there whilst we were having our lunch, so Jeffry and I decided to let the alpacas out of the float, onto a grassy, green area next to the car. They were happily eating away for several minutes when a bus stopped just next to where we were parked and from it disembarked a large group of Japanese tourists. Ironically enough, they were far more impressed with the alpacas than they were with the iconic statue of The Dog On The Tuckerbox! Lots of photos were taken of the alpacas with the smiling tourists before we got them back into the float and carried on with the final leg of our journey to Canberra.

A Royal time at a Royal Show.

Arriving at the showground in the evening, we settled the alpacas down into Flowerdale's designated pens and then left to find our hotel. The show started the following morning and being the first Australian show I had seen, it was all very interesting. I took two of our alpacas into the



ring and Jeffry took in the remaining three at the appropriate times. The first alpaca I took in was exhibited in a large class of juniors and although she was called forward by the judge she unfortunately did not win a ribbon. The second alpaca, called Princess Protea, was in the junior brown female class and she won the first prize! Flowerdale also won another first, second and reserve champion. We left the Canberra Royal Show very happy with our achievements.

Hot,hot,hot. Dry, dry, dry.

As you all might expect, one of the major differences between the UK and Australia is the climate – Australia being extremely hot in the summer! However, one of the drawbacks of this is that much of Australia is very short of water during the summer months, including Flowerdale. It is said that Australia is the

metres of high capacity water pipe and the required fittings, we got on with installing the new sprinkler system. Although this was quite a complicated and arduous task, we decided to do it ourselves and save a lot of money in the process. Due to various problems we encountered along the way, it took Haydn and I three weeks to complete the installation of the sprinkler system but it now works perfectly and the two front paddocks will stay green all year round without running short of water.

Hopefully the grass will be greener after my work on the farm.

While working on the irrigation project we were also carrying out renovations on five of the paddocks at Flowerdale Estate. Again, Haydn and I did this work ourselves. Before we could start we needed to research and buy

Being a smaller show than Canberra, we expected to do very well at Wodonga, but unfortunately we did not quite manage to equal our achievement at Canberra. However, this certainly does not mean we did badly as we took away one first, two seconds and a third prize. Once the show was over we headed home on Saturday evening and had a well earned rest on the Sunday enjoying a night of camping on a nearby riverbank.

Busy with babies.

We have been kept busy with almost thirty cria's born while I have been at Flowerdale. Every cria born is weighed once a day for the first week after birth to make sure it is receiving adequate nutrition and is putting on weight. A few of these new crias struggled to put on weight in the first few days, so we gave them the odd bottle-feed to try and ensure a healthy start to life. The matings at Flowerdale take place over two periods of time throughout the year to try and avoid cria's being born during times of extreme heat or cold. The two mating periods during the year are March to May and September to December – springtime and autumn. As well as making sure all of the births take place trouble free, this is obviously also the period that new matings and spit-offs are being organised and carried out. Flowerdale has two stud males which are used over most of the herd, but many outside matings have also been brought in, particularly for the best females in the herd.

I shall be leaving Flowerdale shortly in order to go traveling all the way up the coast from Melbourne to Cairns and I know that I will be very sad to finally say goodbye. Apart from learning a huge amount about alpacas, I have also made firm friends with many of the locals and the Farmans in particular. When I first started organising my stay here at Flowerdale I was unsure as to how it was going to work out. I was fairly sure that no one had done anything like this before on an alpaca farm. I am thoroughly glad I pushed any doubts to the back of my mind as I had a fantastic time and was very well looked after at Flowerdale. I would encourage any other young people interested in alpacas to try and do an exchange on an overseas alpaca farm as it is truly a wonderful experience.



Harry and Haydn working on the new irrigation system.

driest continent on earth. I had not considered that this might be a problem before coming out to Flowerdale. I quickly became aware that irrigating some of the paddocks to keep the grass alive during the summer would be one of our ongoing projects whilst I was there. With the intention of initially irrigating two of the front paddocks only, we first sought specialist advice on what the very large water pump in the lake at Flowerdale could handle in terms of capacity.

The paddocks would be irrigated by placing large sprinkler heads at points on the fence lines. As each sprinkler pumps out three hundred litres of water a minute, we worked out that we would use about twenty thousand litres of water a day when we used the sprinkler system – causing a shortage of water in the lake at the height of summer. To counter this problem, we spent some time repairing an old broken down water bore on the property and piped it into the lake. We were amazed when we realized the bore pumps out almost fifty thousand litres of water a day; as such an amount would easily keep the lake full of water all year round whilst using the irrigation system.

the new cultivation implements for the tractor. Haydn bought a 7 tyne chisel plough and power harrows. We started work on the paddocks, first ploughing then power harrowing them. Once the work was finished, we have picked up rocks uncovered by the ploughing, before the paddocks were ready for seeding. The seed is a special mix of grasses that are particularly good for Alpacas.

A show with a funny name - Wodonga.

While all this was going on, Haydn and I also had to prepare for the Wodonga Show. This involved training another junior female – and as with Canberra we did this over two weeks always with an experienced alpaca walking on a lead in front.

Wodonga is about three hours north of Flowerdale so we traveled up there the night before and left our five animals at the showground overnight. Staying at a hotel nearby, we discovered over dinner that some of the other breeders at the show were also at the same hotel. After a quiet drink at the bar and a good night's sleep, Haydn and I made our way to the showground at 8am. We had some time to spare before our animals had to enter the ring as in most Australian shows the Suri classes are usually judged first.

Having taken delivery of all four hundred

They tell me my involvement has been a positive experience for them at the Flowerdale Estate alpaca farm. So there may be future opportunities for young people like me. As a starting point you could visit the website at www.flowerdalealpacas.net

Harry Douglas