

British Wool Celebrates 75 Years

Thursday 11th September saw British Wool celebrating 75 years.

Since 1950, British Wool has grown into a cooperative owned by more than 30,000 sheep farmers ensuring fair prices, quality, and the global promotion of UK fleece.

To celebrate this milestone, British Wool's regional depots opened their doors for a behind-the-scenes look at where the UK's wool journey begins.

The depot at South Molton was no exception. They held an Open Day with tours, a very nice lunch and then an optional visit to John Arbon Textiles, all of which they offered free of charge.

There were a number of board members attending to answer questions, County Representative Lindy Head was there and Depot Manager Adrian Prisk conducted the tours.



The British Wool grading system categorises wool based upon both its style and characteristics. The depot's main job is to maximise the value of the wool for their members.

The style of wool is determined by its staple length, crimp, fineness, handle, and lustre.

There are six main styles of British wool:

Fine	Wool from such breeds as: Charollais, Clun Forest, Dorset, Hampshire, Shropshire, Southdown, Suffolk, and their crosses.
Medium	Wool from such breeds as: Beltex, Bleu du Maine, Border Leicester, Halfbred Scotch/Welsh, Lleyn, Devon Closewool, Romney, Texel, and their crosses.
Cross	Wool from such breeds as: Masham, Mule, Scottish Greyface and their crosses.
Lustre	Wool from such breeds as: Bluefaced Leicester, Devon & Cornwall Longwool, Whiteface/Greyface Dartmoor, Lincoln/Leicester Longwool, Teeswater, Wensleydale, and their crosses.
Hill	Wool from such breeds as: Cheviot, Exmoor Horn, Hill Radnor, Lonk, Shetland, Beulah/Welsh Hill Speckled Face, and their crosses.
Mountain	Wool from such breeds as: Blackface, Dalesbred, Rough Fell, Swaledale, Welsh Mountain and their crosses.

The depot supplies almost 120 grades of fleece wool. Each of these are identified with a grade number and brief description, plus more than 20 grades of lamb's wool, organic and traceable wool grades. They also grade several speciality wools which have distinctive characteristics and are usually specific to a particular breed.





Within each style of wool, fleeces are graded by quality with judgements made across a range of characteristics.



The characteristics include:

Hog	First Shear up to 15 months growth
Ewe	Second or subsequent shear up to 12 months growth
No 1	Good uniformity of style, length, colour with a sound staple
No 2	Average uniformity of style, length, and some slight discolouration and/or staple weakness
Discoloured	Natural discolouration, yellowness in colour
Soft Cotts	Slightly matted fibres
Cotts	Matted fibres
Grey	Grey fibre content more than expected within the fleece
Kemp	Kempy fibre content more than expected within the fleece

Lamb's wool is graded as it is received and paid for on the same basis as fleece wool. They supply the wool market with 3 grades of second shear (Medium, Romney, and Mule).

A premium of **20p** per kilo is paid on **some** grades of organic wool (based on the 2024/25 season)

All wool that British Wool sell at auction can be sold as traceable, as every bale has a unique QR code that helps identify which farmers wool is within that specific bale. However, this information

is only provided to brands if they pay a fixed price premium over and above the auction price. This premium is returned to the farmer members at the end of the season.

Once the grading process is complete, it is compressed and packed in the relevant colour bags



It is estimated that this machine can compress about 250kg of fleece into one of these bags



A sample of wool from each bag is sent off for testing. Buyers will receive these samples so that they can see the quality of the fleeces before they buy at auction.



There are approximately 22 wool auctions a year.

For this and more information please visit <https://www.britishwool.org.uk> particularly in relation to looking after your fleeces to maximise their value.

There is a misconception that British Wool set the price per kilo of fleece. This is not true. The fleece goes to auction and it is the buyer who sets the price according to the quality of the fleece. So if you want a good price for your fleeces, look after them and ensure that they look and feel good before they come off the sheep.

JOHN ARBON TEXTILES

As part of the Open Day celebrations, we were also treated to a tour at John Arbon Textiles which is located just a 5-minute walk from the depot.

John Arbon started the business approximately 24 years ago by collecting unwanted machinery from the mills in Yorkshire and restoring them to working order. The oldest machine is thought to have been made circa 1890. Every machine has a name and none of them are run by computer.

The Mill was purchased by Sonya and her colleague approximately 4 years ago when John retired.

The fleeces are purchased at auction and sent to Yorkshire for scouring, carding, combing and dyeing.

Once the dyed fibre arrives back at the Mill, it goes onto one of the three gill boxes (Cuthbert, Ralph and A2D2) which begin the intricate process of straightening and aligning the fibre using a set of pins (similar to a hairbrush). Each batch produced travels through the gill boxes a minimum of three times, and with every pass, the fibre (at this point known as tops) becomes more even, drapery and lustrous.



Ralph blends colours together thinning the fibre stream making the fibres more parallel.

Next, these aligned fibre tops move onto the spinning machines: Butler, an old and steadfast sample spinner, and Kevin, a newer and bigger model (he is a 1980s French double drafting ring spinner and the largest machine at the Mill). Once spun, the singles rest for a week while the fibres relax into their new configuration.

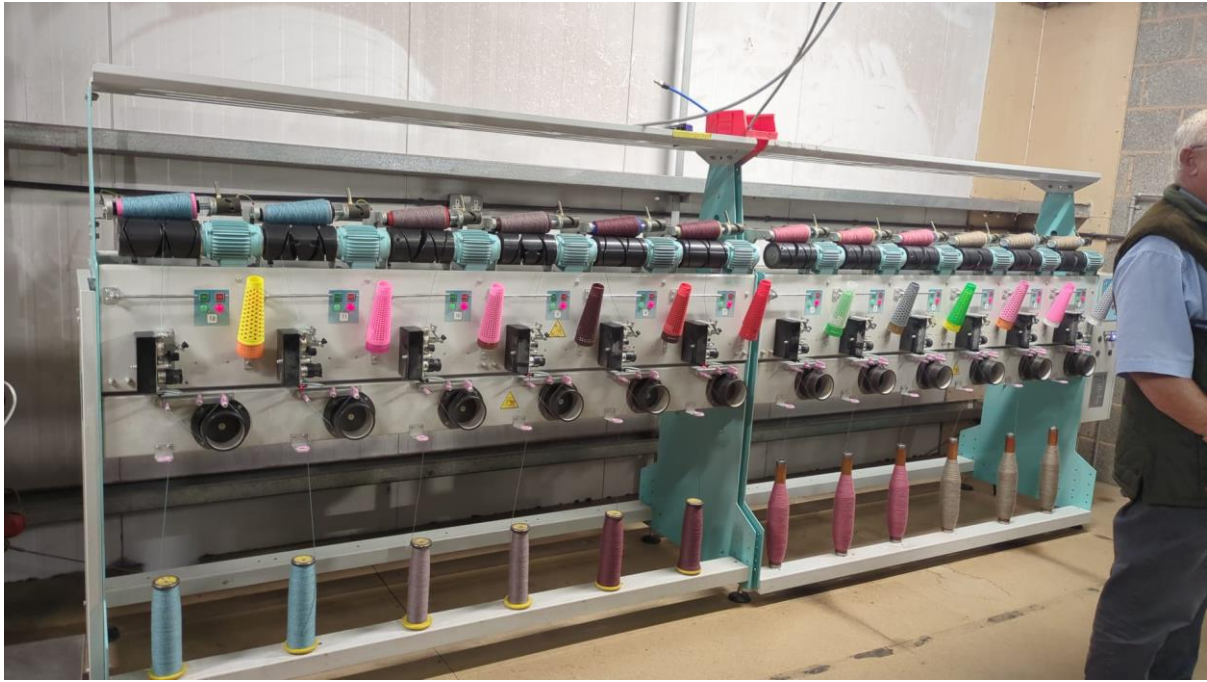


Butler the Ring Spinner



Kevin – The Draft Spinner with 96 spinning heads. Takes the Tops down to a single ply in one go.

When resting is complete, the singles are coned on either Rupert Lee or Gino (the Italian cone winder) and then plied on Mr. Boyd (the stately folding machine). Finally, the yarn is skeined on one of the Bradford skein winders – Gillian and Piglet, who are both vintage Victorian cast iron and wood construction machine.



Gino – Takes a single yarn and puts it onto the cones



Mr Boyd - Plyer/Folder – Takes the single yarn and makes plyed yarn



Gillian - Turns bobbins or cones into skeins



Piglet – smaller version of Gillian

And obviously the Shop at the end of the tour



For more information, please go to <https://www.jarbon.com>