

Crafted with kindness

Deborah Griffin has discovered a sensitive and sustainable way to turn the fleeces of her flock into luxurious sheepskins

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For each skin, a technique is used that doesn't cost the life of the animal



The written directions from the local village to Deborah Griffin's Peak District farm are rather telling: "Follow the road uphill, then some way into high countryside until you reach a public house. Remember where it is, as it's the only major building for some distance." As the car climbs up and up, the land becomes lonelier, the air colder. When the old pub looms into view, like the dubious den for ne'er-do-wells in Daphne du Maurier's *Jamaica Inn*, it is indeed clear that this will be the last sign of civilisation for some time.

After travelling further into the rolling hills, eventually an unmarked track leads over a bridge to an elegant old stone farmhouse of warm-coloured brick. Inside, armchairs and window seats are invitingly draped with thick fleeces. If you found yourself at this remote destination without knowing the story of Deborah's business, The Living Rug Company, you would probably assume that these were exceptionally soft and fluffy sheepskins – but you would be wrong. Remarkably, each one is carefully handcrafted by Deborah herself, using a technique that doesn't cost the life of the sheep that provide them.

The process that makes this possible involves attaching the fleece to a felt backing rather than using the traditional suede one. To further their unique status (there are no others like these created in the UK), the rugs are then labelled with the name of the sheep that donated the wool – so you know exactly which animal you have to thank for cosy feet on cold winter nights. In



return for providing the proverbial three bags full, Deborah takes meticulous care of her now 65-strong flock. The sheep are fed twice a day with organic feed and the best hay, are attended by a vet and, although the majority of their time is spent roaming in the clear Derbyshire air, weather-proof shelters are available if they want them.

Unsurprisingly, this delightful business model was born out of Deborah's high regard for one of Britain's longest-standing domestic animals. Having raised a family in nearby Buxton, her husband Kevin's company was then bought out, and the couple found themselves in a position to make new choices. Deborah was already interested in keeping the two horses she had in a way that suited their nature as flight animals, and wanted to liberate them from their stables into a wilder setting. So when Kevin bought a sports car for himself, he also

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE
On her farm in the Peak District, Deborah lives with her rare breed and pet sheep, over

half of which she has saved from slaughter. She places carded wool on top of the fleeces to create her rugs





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Each rug is marked with the name of the sheep the fleece came from; compatible carded wool from the flock

is combined with the fleece; the long and arduous job of rolling the fleece will later reveal glossy results, backed with a layer of felt



bought a 40-acre farm for Deborah. Of the next step, she recalls, "I had always fancied some sheep."

As a result, eight years ago, Deborah acquired four hardy Herdwick sheep: Oliver, Billy, Ian and Babe. "I really liked their characters and instantly fell in love with them." Next came four rescue sheep, Blue-faced Leicester crosses, or 'mules', bred for slaughter. She paid the same market price that anyone buying them for meat would have done. More common-or-garden sheep were added steadily until three years ago, when Kevin gave her a wedding anniversary gift of – yes – more sheep. These were Valais Blacknose, which resemble a friendly, four-legged Yeti, and are generally seen on the Swiss Alps. Since then, more rare breeds, such as Gotland, Icelandic and Shetland – all of which have interesting wool – have joined the flock.

To begin with, Deborah gave the fleeces away, but as their volume increased, she began to experiment with other uses for them, such as making soap and candles. However, she soon discovered that 'vegetarian sheepskin rugs' are hugely popular in Holland. Inspired and intrigued, she went over to meet a maker on the island of Texel, near Amsterdam. Not believing in her own ability, she had planned to commission rugs, but discovered that this would leave her £400 out of pocket with each one. The internet came to her rescue and she learned from an American on YouTube that, just maybe, she could do this for herself.

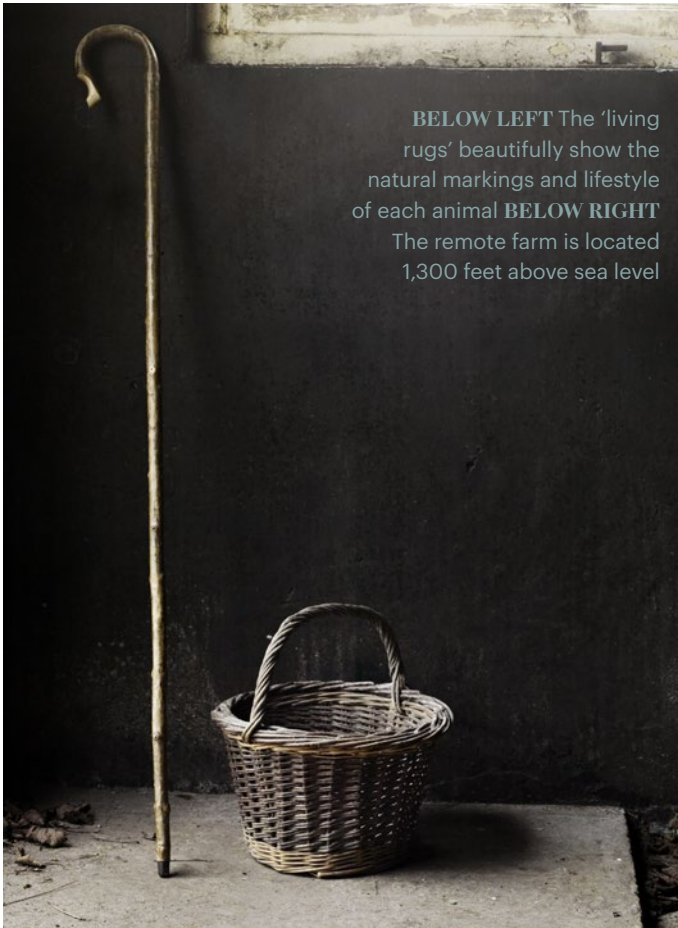
During shearing, on a good day a sheep's fleece will come off in one piece. Although Deborah's rugs now incorporate these in their entirety – beautifully showcasing the natural markings – while she was still learning, she found it easier to start with small sections. A sheep's hide is not always the most practical shape, and smaller pieces are better suited as runners for benches or as footstools. "My husband has Bert on his footstool," she says. "He's been putting his feet on him for a couple of years." The making process takes place in one of the farm's sturdy limestone

outbuildings. Here, Deborah combines a sheep's fleece with carded wool (wool that is cleaned and prepared for felting or spinning). A good fleece is precious, so carded wool is sometimes bought in from a local mill. Deborah sources compatible materials, so that a super-soft Gotland rug will be made of 100 per cent Gotland wool. She also sends out any of her own fleeces that are not considered good enough for rugs to be carded themselves.

The creation of each rug requires careful attention, as well as plenty of elbow grease. "I take the washed fleece and lay it out, so I get the shape I want," Deborah explains. "Then I place three layers of carded wool on top. I also put netting over to hold it all in place during the felting process." This is where soap and hot

"My husband has Bert on his footstool – he's been putting his feet on him for a couple of years"






BELOW LEFT The 'living rugs' beautifully show the natural markings and lifestyle of each animal **BELOW RIGHT** The remote farm is located 1,300 feet above sea level

water, carried across from the farmhouse kitchen, come in, plus a system of gentle-but-firm rubbing. "You are creating a skin," she says. "The feeling is surprisingly therapeutic."

The next stage is physically harder. The fleece, along with its backing, is wrapped around a tube, which in turn is wrapped in durable plastic. This is rolled, and rolled, and rolled. Like pastry, it needs to be rolled from different angles for an even finish, and to prevent it from shrinking back. Unlike pastry, this process takes a few hours. Rolls of fleeces are even dragged along the ground in the yard; a horse has been co-opted for this in the past, but Deborah has since discovered that it's easier to do it herself. Unrolled, a wet fleece does not look promising – but, once dry, soft and springy, it reveals its beauty, its fibres stuck fast to a skin of felt.

Deborah has now begun to lead courses in the alchemy of creating felted rugs, while also offering business advice to others with ambitions of setting up small ventures like hers. Indeed, her own continues to go from strength to strength. Although she uses no formal advertising, relying instead on her website, Instagram and Facebook, this approach allows potential buyers to get to know each sheep by name (not to mention personality). It also offers a wonderful insight into her bucolic life amid the Peak District hills, and it clearly works because, year on year, her rugs sell out. However, she has no plans for large-scale expansion: "Whatever money I earn from the sheep goes back to the sheep. I wanted to prove that I could do something after being a housewife for so many years. If I can just show people what wonderful and useful animals sheep can be, then I will have achieved what I set out to do." 

 *For more information, visit thelivingrugcompany.com.*

