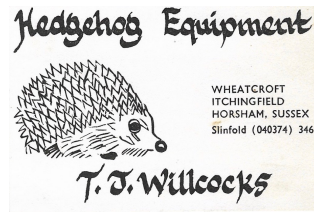


THE RISE AND DEMISE OF MY COTTAGE INDUSTRY



Before becoming a therapist and The Bowen Man of Malvern Tim Willcocks has had several 'incarnations'.

Hedgehog Equipment - for Spinning and Textile Supplies - was one of these, from 1974 for ten years.

In 2019 he was asked to write a piece for the Journal of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers about his personal journey with Hedgehog and how the scene has changed over the past forty years.

The following story is the full, unexpurgated edition which records the story in full (6,000 words). The version appearing in the Journal is just one quarter of its length, so misses much information and many anecdotes.

Read on

THE ORIGINAL MR HEDGEHOG

by Tim Willcocks, October 2019

Without the international storytelling festival at Wenlock Edge back in 2011, all this might not have come to light. For that's where I met Mandy and Paul of Classic Carders, in the craft tent.

Five generations ago my family were sheep farmers at North Tawton, Devon; four generations later my sister moved to Devon to farm sheep, and being a storyteller I claim the family inheritance prompted me to spin yarns and to pull the wool over peoples' eyes!

In 1974, I also started making the first drum carders in Europe as I thought at the time.



Canadian Beginnings

Take a step back to 1971 and the West Coast of Canada to Vancouver in the hippie days. My Canadian wife Alice's sister had just returned full of enthusiasm, from a year's foundation course at Emerson College in Sussex, England.

"Just look what I've learned, Alice it takes ages to learn!", said Joanie getting out her spinning wheel and starting to spin.

"That looks easy" replied Alice, "let me try."

"No it's not easy..... took me ages to get it right".

But Alice was a natural from the start, catching the rhythm and sequence right away. Within the week she had sold her pottery wheel and kiln (too messy when changing a baby's nappies

regularly), and bought a spinning wheel, carders and loom. Her friend Anthea also used a 'drum carder', to speed up the whole process.
I stood by, with a bemused look on my face.

Fast forward a year or three and we lived in rural Sussex, my highly paid government work in Canada completed, now searching for a meaningful paid occupation in low-pay Britain. A car journey to the West coast of Scotland in 1974 gave us a chance to check out fish farm opportunities, visit the Findhorn community, and call at a mill in Galashiels with a Spinning Jenny still in running order since 1869 ... but in need of a bloke permanently on hand with an oilcan, and nimble fingers for constant adjustments. Soon afterwards we experienced a British wool grading station and were shown around a carding and spinning mill in Buckfastleigh.

We found out that British hand spinners considered themselves to be frightfully advanced, and that Britain was considered to be the natural centre for textiles indeed Alice was told "Oh no, dear you shouldn't spin such thick 'nubbly' and chunky yarns. Really, dear, you can't call yourself a proper spinner until you can spin as well as a machine!" ('Thick and nubbly' was then very fashionable on the West Coast of Canada and USA, and the thick B.C. Cowichan Indian sweaters really popular).

However, we put on exhibitions at home of her hand spun wools and woven, knitted or crocheted garments, and invited viewing from relatives, friends and neighbours. These were astoundingly successful, sales very encouraging and she put her name on the map. We also noted that in the UK hand carders were nearly all imported from Finland, looms from Scandinavia, most spinning wheels came from New Zealand, and that drum carders were unknown Britain a natural centre? True or false?

What an entrepreneurial opportunity for me to start a home-grown business!

Opportunity Takes Root, with Industrial Discoveries

I wrote to Anthea for details of her Drum Carder. She posted back an artist's sketch. For the next month I burned the phone lines hot at my engineering workplace in London, lining up suppliers of English hardwood timber, good quality plywoods, metal fittings and screw threads.

Design work in London on the Craig Goch high dam in Wales was slow and tedious, but it offered an excellent office space for working out my own designs and pricing structures! The catch was in finding out about the wires used for carding - 'card clothing' they called it, made somewhere in the north of England, probably Yorkshire. Arriving a week later at Leeds railway station I thumbed the Yellow Pages, highlighted Mirfield, and made my way to a hostel. Next morning at Holdsworth's card clothing works I learned a mass of new terminology and facts, and was promised 100ft of high grade heavy duty belt carding.

"Funny you coming here and taking such an interest" they said, "We only have one customer for this grade - they are in New Zealand no idea what they use it for!"

I also learned from them that for industrial use this 2" wide belting was first put on the drums with a tension of about one hundredweight (=112lbs). Without this initial tension the card clothing stretches with use, causing 'creep' and an irregular carding surface. How could I replicate this ... some food for thought?

The road led on to nearby Cleckheaton where Joseph Sellers Ltd's factory floor had rows of machines making small sheets of card clothing aimed at the dog grooming market. They offered me larger samples to take home for prototype hand carders, and of course I accepted all these kind offers.

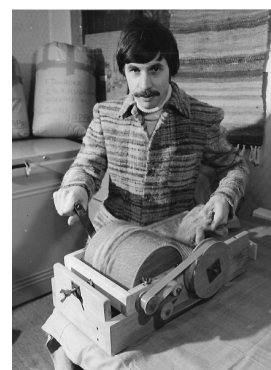
The design and construction of the first prototype drum carder meant me taking over the use of that little room by the kitchen – the ‘pantry’. Shavings, sawdust and finer dust crept through the doorway cracks and settled all over breakfast or whatever, and I was soon banned to work outside, to the rickety old wooden garage up the drive, with a single fixed window, doors swinging about in the breeze, and the autumn and winter winds whistling in with damp leaves and venom.

With handle fittings, screw adjustments and stamped iron plates fabricated by the village blacksmith Don Reynolds, hardwoods from the local timber mill, plywood from Shoreham, the drive belting from a firm in Keighley, and most other metal screws and other fittings supplied by our local ironmonger I was getting into flow.

Drum Carders

- I developed the drum carder using a mix of home grown English hardwoods: beech or elm for the main frame and hornbeam for the bearings, whilst the skin of the main drum was very thin (1/32”) birch faced ply.

Each drum carder was finished with a Hedgehog stamp mark and its serial number – and I was very happy to hear at Wonderwool Wales 2019 that No 96(?) is still in use!



Tim Willcocks aka Mr Hedgehog

- To replicate the industrial process of setting the card clothing under 1cwt tension, one end of the belting was fastened securely to the drum or roller under construction, the other end was tightly ‘mole-gripped’, and led via a nylon rope over a pulley to a 28lb gravity weight suspended from a roof support beam. Winding that weight up using a home-designed plywood gearing system, probably provided at least ½ cwt of tension. Then hammer in the fixing nails! I understand that today’s makers glue the clothing all around the drum in preference to a pre-tensioned system.

- Pricing was tricky without guidelines and with little commercial experience. So I made a stab in the dark and settled on a formula of:

Cost of all materials, plus cost of my construction time at £5/hr, plus 25% of the total so far - to cover various overhead costs. Plus post and packing of course, as required.

Then, by comparing with ‘the competition’ (if any), I would adjust the figure up or down, and hey presto I had an answer!

I sold the first batch of six drum carders just for the cost price of materials: that was around £16. But the next ones fetched the huge sum of £32.50 each!

To make costs more affordable I later developed a manual for the detailed construction of a drum carder, based on my own experience. It cost a fraction of the single unit but was never a popular item ... probably ‘one step too far’ for most users!

Hand Carders

- At the same time I was working on hand carder designs. Hand spinners preferred their carders to be ‘curved’ to work easily with a nice wristy action, so I would pop down to rummage around the nearest timber yard searching for warped thin planks. These came at a considerable discount and made excellent hand carders!

When the yard ran out of warped planks, and after some experimentation, I finally reverted to plywood, and to mimic the curved shape inserted a piece of foam material between the plywood and the card clothing sheets before both gluing and stapling around the edges. And finished off by placing the Hedgehog stamp mark on each one individually!

Soon I found that without proper jigs, I was unable to turn out a reliable supply of hand card blanks, and farmed out the making of these to Ian Edwards in Harrogate to send me 200 pairs whenever needed. My job then was to fit the card sheets to the carder blanks, and to pack and post them, as necessary.

Indian Spinner Heads

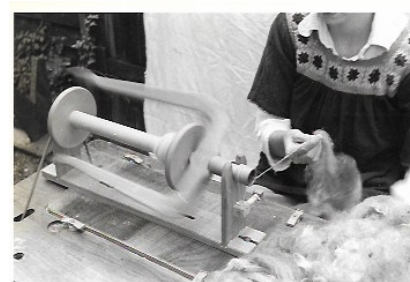
- Also at the time I was designing the first 'Indian Spinner Head' to be marketed in the UK. The British Columbia Cowichan people mount these spinner heads on an old sewing machine treadle, thus sideways on for the user, so in effect you have to 'spin round the corner'. They are great for spinning thick or thin, regular or nubbly, and can hold a pound or more of yarn at a time.



'Indian Head'
Spinner on Treadle



Frame for 'front-
on' Spinning



'Longhorn' Spinner on
Sewing Machine Treadle

I went ahead with two versions: the basic model made of regular softwood (£9.80), or the fancy 'longhorn' version made in ash, cherry or hornbeam (£12.50).

I encouraged customers to search out a sturdy sewing machine treadle for £5 (there are hardly of these any left - now mostly converted to coffee tables!). The alternative was a specifically designed spinning frame for front-on spinning in the usual way, which I offered.

However this was revolutionary thinking for the sedate rural Sussex middle classes, and my sales were limited.

Why Hedgehog?

We came up with several possible names for this new business, and 'Hedgehog' was a front runner, with its resemblance to card clothing and especially to the appearance of the drum carder. The name stuck fully on a mild summer evening when a real hedgehog walked across the garden and willingly accepted a saucer of milk!

Exhibitions and Marketing

Meanwhile Alice was working on tapestries, rugs, and knitwear as well as discovering the local vegetable dyes and various mordants. Plus the brighter 'chemical' dyes.

The kitchen often steamed like a witches' brewhouse and the clothes line exhibited the colours of onion skins, dogs mercury, madder, woad, rhubarb (you can dye with rhubarb leaves, or die from eating them!) and crotle among others.

With a few outworking knitters she had also developed a great line in selling Lopi Icelandic wool sweaters.

Her 'rainbow mohair' pullovers were yet to take off – many of these with colours perfectly suited to the individual user among her customers I think the astrologer Russell Grant was her best known!



Hand Dyed and Woven

Dog lovers and other visitors would ask if it was possible to spin their favourite dog's hair – "Such as what I have in this bag here". The answer was regularly "Yes, but you need far more of it, and it will be much stronger if it is blended with sheep, wool".

'Oh, why?'

Well, technically each strand of greasy fleece is covered with mini-scales, rather like a rat's tail. In a natural fleece these scales are 'opened up', standing proud from the surface, whereas in a washed and degreased fleece they lie flat.

So if you spin '*in the grease*' with the scales opened up, the fibres all interlock and grip together strongly. With washing, the grease is removed and the strong grip maintained.

A yarn spun *following* washing is just not quite so strong and 'grippy'!

Dog, cat, human and others hairs don't have scales, so are more slippery and a lot less reliable and strong for spinning. But blended with sheep's wool they maintain their own character yet spin far more easily.

From this time on our exhibitions really started taking off, with "Buy the finished product" or "Buy some kit to make your own"!

We had gained traction for Hedgehog by exhibiting and demonstrating around the south of England in places such as a local Horsham bookshop, at meetings of regional guilds of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers, self-sufficiency locations, the Peoples Free Festival at Brighton, a Newbury group, the Maltings Craft Market in Farnham, Strawberry Fayre in Stockbridge and the Malvern College of Art and Design. I will never forget Kim Wright in Malvern who would set his balls of single ply yarn in a teapot or two, and ply these yarns from out of the spouts!). A few small low-cost ads helped the promotion drive, and so did a nice article in 'The Lady' magazine.

A highlight of 1975 was the long hot drive from Sussex to Darlington with my unreliable little trailer to attend the Summer School of the Association of the Guilds of Weavers, Spinners, and Dyers. It was beautiful weather. We camped out there with many others, and of course met other 'competitors' like Eliza Leadbeater from Altringham.

I have a little note which says: Total sales £32.30 I wonder if that covered the cost of our outing back then?

The Man from the Ministry

Somehow the Ministry of Trade and Development had got to know of Hedgehog Equipment as a rural industrial concern, and one day the 'man from the ministry' arrived in pin striped suit from London to assess the potential future of my business in terms of Britain's exports.

I expect the magic link had been CoSIRA, the Countryside Agency for Small Industries in Rural Areas, with whom I had some contact.

He was bemused to discover "The most rural enterprise I have ever experienced", and he took excellent photos!

To our excitement and joy these were published with very positive reports in British export publications throughout the world, in many languages.

That's where my export experience started, as orders started arriving for specialist UK fleeces and special fibres from New York, Japan and New Zealand, and drum carder enquiries from the USA, Canada, Nepal (for a United Nations project) and elsewhere.

The Nepal and Indo-Pakistan Connections

A United Nations body was then initiating a spinning/weaving project to provide work in rural areas of Nepal for ex-Gurkha soldiers from the British army, and one spring day I unexpectedly received an order for 12 drum carders: the largest order I had ever received, worth £2,000 back in 1976!

Being still new at the 'manufacturing game', each item turned out from the workshop had its little idiosyncracies, and it was a massive challenge: to get them near enough identical. But the day came when the shipper arrived to collect, and down our narrow country lane came a huge low-loader to load up the twelve carders, spare drums and other ancillaries. I do hope this equipment was put to good use - I never heard from the purchaser again.



I had advertised Hedgehog Equipment in 'Appropriate Technology' in 1974-5 which attracted some interest, and developed into a few days on contract spent in the Cotswolds in winter, to teach a Pakistani from a remote Hunza/apricot-growing region how to construct

a drum carder. I was camping out to save money, and awoke one morning with the roof of my 20 year-old tent ripping under a heavy snowfall!

Later on, in 1980, the appropriate technology perspective also attracted attention from OCM Ltd 'The UK's Largest Importer of Oriental Carpets', and managing director Brian Huffner popped over with his wife one Saturday to 'explore options': he was looking for an advanced version of my drum carder for use with Tibetan wools in the borderlands of Indo-Pak country.

Also at that time I was being asked by a some less energetic hand spinners for a motorised version, so I hooked up a standard model to a washing machine motor. We flicked the switch then stood back in awe as the beast flew around, vibrating dangerously with tufts of wool flying everywhere.

The project was shelved, having decided that this was not truly a 'hand carding or spinning' operation.

However, it was a good experimental step in the direction of the OCM project, and between myself and William Tatham Ltd of Rochdale we developed a hand-operated semi-industrial version. Sadly that project was also stopped, as the cost of manufacture and shipping was far too high for the purses of the end users.

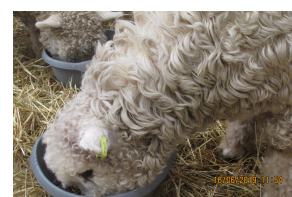
Fleeces and Wools

The UK may not have the finest or most commercial wools in the world, but it does offer the greatest variety of types, from very fine Southdown or Shetland fleeces, through the lustrous longwools of Wensleydales and Lincolns, and the coarsest 'mattress stuffing' wools of Blackfaces and highland sheep. With the addition of the 'rare breeds' such as the Manx Loghtan, the Soay from St Kilda, the seaweed-eating South Ronaldsay from Orkney, and the 2-horn or 4-horn Jacob, there is a wealth of variety here. And add to that list the more recent 'imported' stock, such as the Friesland and Texel.

But the different terminologies of wool-talk are pitfalls in themselves. Farmers discuss their flocks of mules with ewes and followers, hand spinners wax eloquent over the colour shades and 'handle' and texture of different Jacobs, while the wool marketing blokes might describe a Lincoln fleece as a '701', and an off-white fleece as 'dark grey/black'.



4-Horn Jacob



Greyface Dartmoor



My customers were asking for different varieties of fleece, and I was completely ignorant about this! To be able to discuss and sell a range of fleeces I had to be able to buy them from the BWMB (British Wool Marketing Board) and to have a working knowledge of all these differing terminologies.



Kerry Hill



4-Horn Hebridean

The Need for an Urgent Baptism!

I contacted John Ramsden, marketing manager at the BWMB, to say I needed urgent help to identify and discuss the wool types, so that I could buy from the BWMB: what could he come up with?

With his and Chief Grader Steven Ballinger's assistance I was fixed to attend an intense 3-day 'Apprentice Graders' course, which threw me in with wool graders from all over the UK. Held annually, this is to teach and refresh graders from the many wool depots across the UK to recognise all the different grades of wool, probably then numbering about 800, but fewer now with rationalisation.

Baptism by fire indeed! My head spun with the intricacies of staple (length), lustre, colour, coarseness (then measured by the Bradford Count, and now by microns), shearling fleeces (different from 2nd or 3rd shear), the degree of 'kemp' – dead hairs, and even the yield (the % weight loss from industrial scouring).

Finally all these qualities were refined to a single number, such as 701 (Lincoln Roller), 538 (Kent No 2) or 675 (Welsh blue & rubby). *(Please note these numbers are hypothetical as I cannot recall the proper ones!)*



Senior Wool Grader?

I came away from those few days a new man, ready to buy, sell and discuss British fleeces with the best!

Note

The BWMB is owned by about 40,000 farmers and producers around the country, and legally has a complete monopoly on the selling of any fleeces from a 'flock of sheep'. So it is not lawful for a farmer to sell to a hand spinner even one fleece! It sounds crazy, but it actually does give producers protection against certain unscrupulous practices. And many producers turn the occasional blind eye one or two fleeces sold privately to hand spinners from a wool clip are never noticed!

Their main business is to sell all the wools coming in from farmers around the country at the best auction price they can, and to return to the farmers the proceeds of the sales. It was, and presumably still is, an efficient operation. Shetland and Orkney fleeces are outside the system.

Teazles

Industrial carding engines are the inspiration for hand operated drum carders, but for each type of carder the quality of the fleece may necessitate an even earlier first step.

Industrially the Fearnought is a vicious piece of machinery which can tear and pull apart even the most matted cotts in a fleece.

In hand work it is to 'tease' the fleece apart by hand prior to hand or drum carding. The word tease comes from the French word 'tisser' (to pull), which is also the origin of the English

'teazle'. Teazles were traditionally used for raising the 'nappe' on finished cloth, and indeed genuine teazles were still in use until 1993 for finishing billiard table cloth at Lodgemore Mills in Stroud, Gloucestershire.



New Beginnings

In 1977, we moved to Forest Row in Sussex where I rented a proper workshop at the back of the Forest Craft Centre, with a 'tied house'.

Here there was a Coronet multi-purpose woodworking machine, with a pillar drill and a face finisher in the rear 'making' area. Mid-section was an office for paperwork, to get to grips with VAT registration and to keep warm in winter. Up front was a section for substantial 50 kg bales of six main fleece types, then a ladder to 'upstairs' for grandad's old armchair, general storage, and several 'growbags' of tomatoes beneath the glass roof. It was a wonderful set-up!



"Keep your eyes on the job"

Many customers came to the door attracted by the Craft Centre, and mail order sales blossomed both within the UK and for export. The little Post Office/shop across the road was often filled with 10kg bags of wool, or drum carders packed in banana boxes, all ready for the next post.

"Your fleeces are lovely", my customers said, "but have you no speciality fibres, such as cashmere, alpaca, silk, angora, ramie? Can you get some please?"

For my next trip north to Yorkshire I arranged to pick up a 'sample bale' of fleeces at Inglis & Son, Harrogate (50kg on the roof rack), and in Bradford to source white and Tussah silks from Frank Monkman Ltd, fancy wool 'tops' from Heydemann Shaw, lovely brown and cream coloured alpaca from the Alpaca people, possibly some flax, and a 'reduced price' assortment including angora and cashmere from Texere Yarns.

Back down in Sussex this was a bonanza, and encouraged a big expansion of the mail order work. I took on two part time assistants. Also Jonathan, my then 8yr old, with friends, became adept at making up sample envelopes of fleece and fibres at 1p each in 'old money'.

Spinalongs and Exhibitions

This led to me starting the 'Hedgehog Spinalongs'.

The recipe for these was to find a village hall, decide on a topical issue that myself or another speaker could bring to life probably with a demonstration, and issue invitations to local spinning groups to bring their wheels and anything they'd like to share or discuss.

Of course they paid a small entry fee for the day, and I had fleeces and special fibres readily available for sale.

Pamela Kelley demonstrated flax spinning, the BWMB man talked about the wool trade, and I told snippets about exporting to Nepal, and about our link with OCM Ltd, the exotic oriental carpet people. Lots of spinning was done, even more enthusiastic talking, and my sales went vertical!



The Handspinners' Woolbroker!

Anthrax Anecdote

Some days after receiving a sample package of exotic wools from Sarfraz Brothers in Pakistan, I was alerted by the Ministry of Health(?) to say that it was contaminated and that they were on their way to collect it urgently. We dug the package out from under the stairs, and an hour later the men in white 'hazmat' suits arrived with orders that we were not to touch it: 'Anthrax Contamination'. It was no problem to us, but I have never ordered again from Pakistan!

Wool sorters and graders in this country used to be affected by anthrax: as they pull apart the raw fleeces any possible spores can go flying, and the most deadly variety is inhaled. Sadly the 'cause of illness' cannot be confirmed until after the autopsy result.

Making enquiries I found that anthrax was then endemic in this country – probably it is still? It was/is in spores in the soil of some counties (2 cows died of it in Wiltshire in 2006), and during the last war government experiments with anthrax centred on Gruinard, an island off the west coast of Scotland, which was then put out of bounds for 50 years.

Orkney Venture

In 1978 I was persuaded to undertake the 'Orkney Venture', whereby I would supply carding, spinning and dyeing tuition, expertise, and equipment, and take it all with a cook and tutor(s) to Rousay in the Orkney islands – all expenses paid. Dr Nilda Lamprill undertook to advertise, and thus to bring in enough visiting students to pay for it all.

What a great idea for a summer adventure!

My son Jonathan accompanied us with Richard the cook and Annette as spinning instructor. Barbara, already in Scotland was to meet us there as the plant-dyeing guru.

When we arrived in Rousay with the little car and trailer, Nilda with her young son Frankie, her Spanish accent, and a crestfallen face explained that the three people from Surrey had been in a car accident, the two from the Midlands had fallen ill, and the couple from Italy had missed their flight. Then she brightened up: "But the one from Nova Scotia will be with us tomorrow!"

There was no Plan B.

So taking life by the scruff, we did a local charm offensive, advertising on notice boards and in the Orkney paper, going on community radio, and setting A-boards on the roadside by our schoolhouse venue advertising "Day Spinning and Dyeing Courses HERE". The result? "Och, my old grannie used to spin it's a lost art here in Orkney yes sure I'll come to join you!"

We were reviving an old tradition, and people seemed to come flocking in from the hedgerows attracted by our 'pay by the day' rate. The girl from Nova Scotia was amazed and delighted!

The Orkney island of North Ronaldsay is so windswept that the stone walls around it are to protect the meagre growing plots, and to keep the sheep *out*, so the flocks here have adapted to eating seaweed, even swimming to more succulent patches of the crop! Hence they have a diet with very high iodine content, and often require special supplementation to survive in 'normal' pastures.

For hand spinning they have good but quite small fleeces, with lovely shades of colour, but the 'yield' is incredibly low: once washed or scoured they lose about 70% of their original weight which is made up of a mix of lanolin, sand, seaweed and sand-hoppers!

Shetland Side Trip

When all was under way, I took off for three days to visit Shetland and flew into Sumburgh. Guided by expectation and hope, I hitch-hiked my way around to visit as many of my



'Spinning Courses is Here'



Shetland 'Moorit' Ram

Shetland wool suppliers as I could, starting with Jamiesons in Lerwick, on to the wee isle of Papa Stour for a night (fresh-caught herring with 'tatties' was the evening meal), and next day to others including my most distant supplier on Yell.

A good opportunity to become familiar with the 'moorit', 'cat-moggat', and other colour variations of the Shetland breed.

All so helpful and friendly, and hitch-hiking was no problem. I was able to explain my suppliers that when I personally graded their wools in Sussex (sent by post) I was giving top prices for good grades and so on down the scale. It was an excellent system: some of them received higher payments than ever before with the middlemen cut out, and others with low grades never sent their fleeces to me again. A win-win situation!

Hilversum Craft Exhibition

Hilversum used to be marked on my old 'wireless dial' – so I knew the name!

A major Craft Fair was held there in the late 70's, which I first went to with Alice to exhibit, sell, and assess its potential for 'another year'. That 'other year' came in 1981, and with an assistant and a car (and trailer?) full of relatively high value goods I set off. The bales of fleece were left at home in favour of silk 'bricks', angora, and cashmere all for hand spinning, and the Tatham Carder prototype also came with us on a whim since no-one in England seemed to want it.

We hit the jackpot!

No other supplier in Europe could get hold of silk that year, either white or Tussah, and at maybe inflated prices my stock just flew off the shelves. The speciality fibres were in high demand, and even the Tatham prototype found a buyer. The buyer called himself Jan.

"Surname?" I asked. "Louet" was his reply, and he explained that he made drum carders in Holland. We had a great conversation about drum carders, in which I said I considered myself the first person in Europe to make one.

His jaw clenched a little as he told me "No" - he was definitely the first.

We sorted this out amicably as we concluded that we had both started in virtually the same month in the year of 'Classic Carder Consciousness'?

In that space of time I was proud to have made 300 carders. Jan's response was that he had made 3,000!

Louet wheels and carders are of course major players in the craft textile world these days. So be it – we parted as friends.

North American Re-Connection, with Lecture Tours.

Alice in the 1970's was developing hand-dyed silk garments, as well as the rainbow mohair knitwear which became her best known product, and in June one of those years we took the kids back to her family in Victoria, timing the visit to coincide with the 1977 biennial Conference of the Pacific Northwest Weavers Association, with the theme of 'Heirlooms from Handlooms'.

She stole the show and won first prize with her handmade silk dress and crocheted shawl, while I displayed woven and kitted garments, took orders for drum carders and sold 200 little teazle 'hedgehogs'! We cleared \$1,250 in two days.



This led on two years later to me giving a lecture tours to several locations in the US and Canada, first of all on the west coast.

The first such tour followed on from a Craft Show stacked with crystals and other 'new age goodies' in Los Angeles, where I was selling finished garments at inflated prices (by UK standards). This led on to visiting friends in Sedona and being given some radio-active rock by Gerald: "The old timers used these to wear round the body to prevent stomach pains" an early form of radiation therapy perhaps?

My assignments were at:

- Gold Beach, Oregon (Curry Spinnners)
- Bend, Oregon (Wildflower Fibers). *This stopover was where I climbed into my hostess's bath tub, and found the taps stuck fully on. She came to the rescue ...*
- Eureka, California (College of the Redwoods)
- Oakland, California ('Straw into Gold'), *arriving from the airport in fog in a shared taxi just 5 minutes before the start time.*
- San Fransisco ('Spindles and Flyers')

My second tour was much better coordinated. For these 'British Sheep Breeds' seminars I was billed as a wool and fleece expert from the UK, telling the story of British hand spinning wools and of course taking orders. As always there were great exchanges of information, and some wonderful hospitality towards me. The venues this time were:

- Staten Island, New York (Flax and Fleece Handspinners Guild), *where I was paid for my talk not in cash but by choosing a Haida carved whale's tooth from an antique collection! Sadly it was later stolen in London.*
- Kingston, New Jersey (WoodsEdge Wools)
- Canton, Ohio (Canton Spinners and Weavers Guild). *I was driven around a little of the Amish country.*
- Chester, New Jersey (Barbara Wheeler). *The first time that I had encountered a double-treadle spinning whee and was well impressed!. Barbara became an excellent customer for large shipments of wools to the USA.*
- Toronto, Ontario (Romni Wools Ltd)
- Halifax, Nova Scotia (Nova Scotia Dept of Recreation).

Go West Young Man the End is Nigh!

Much of my life has been afflicted with less-than-easy options, and those with an astrological interest may be interested that I have a chart indicating: 'If you don't move along regularly in your life, then **Life** will give you a kick which will shift you on uncomfortably!'

So it was. Shortly after these earlier successes we were given notice to quit our nice house to our shock and horror.

But such notice is not possible with a 'tied' residence, so we negotiated a deal, ending up with enough deposit to buy our first home. Only this was not to be in Sussex: we moved 180 miles west to Gloucestershire to a housing area on the edge of the city.

In some respects this was near-suicidal, with sales 'at the door' cut by 90% overnight - apart from continuing Forest Craft Centre sales of my stock. Nor did I have a tailor-made workshop any longer as I was working from home and making costly bi-monthly working visits to Sussex to re-stock. Mail order continued, but at a slower rate.

As soon as I could find alternative workshop premises in a nearby farm outbuilding, I shifted my workshop contents from Sussex in a major move. The rented Luton-head transport van was overloaded, down on it springs, and rocking and rolling but it made the journey!

At this point I felt personally wrenched in pieces, with my creative working centre dispersed to a chicken shed, my 'office' re-set beneath the staircase at home, and the camaraderie of the Craft Centre and the village both gone. We all felt it. Picking up the pieces was not easy, but

ultimately all of us, both parents and kids made life-long friendships, and a wife for Jonathan even came from our chosen Steiner education system!

Hedgehog Equipment plus a Birkenstock sandal dealership with repairs formed the basis of my income. Outworking knitters, personal creations and sales – especially of crystals - made up Alice's. Life became something of a struggle, and with a growing family plus these new initiatives the household creaked with divergent energies.

I started supply teaching at the local school for vital income, constructed a large garden shed to act as office and hold the Birkenstocks, and sold the 'Fleece and Fibre' side of the business to Anna Bowers of Godalming.

Sadly though, Hedgehog by this time was in terminal decline. After another year or so I finally sold the 'Construction' side of the business to Chair of the Gloucester Guild of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers – Bailey Churcher with her partner Ced Titcombe - to continue production and to revive the enterprise in the Forest of Dean. My prized pillar drill probably went with them, but I hung on to the Coronet woodworker for another twenty years – in the vain hope of bringing it into use again some day.

But "No" the angels said, "Once you take a new direction, don't look back!"
These are life's lessons, and a sad ending after some wonderful life experiences and growth.

Alice and I parted company amicably. We are still best friends and have both moved on through our individual journeys.

I was accepted on a one year teacher training course in 3D Design (aka CDT) with weekends taken up as the UK's main Birkenstock repairer and also developing a gift for trading in sandals and crystals at exhibitions.

School teaching itself I found to be hampered by red tape, too many safety considerations and a massive paperwork overload: I switched to 'supply teaching' and home tuition. After a few successful years I moved on yet again, this time to become a Bowen therapist!
25 years later that still continues, treating clients and running courses.

I have even written my first book another potential budding career possibly?

Full Circle

Casually looking at the internet a few years back I was thrilled to discover that Hedgehog Equipment still exists!

No longer in the Forest of Dean but further west, now in the Black Mountains at Cwmyoy.

Meeting Paul and Mandy of Classic Carders near Bridgnorth piqued my interest even more, and when a local Malvern friend this year asked if I knew anything about spinning on a wheel and could I assist her, I once again jumped to the challenge. But could I really reel back 30 years and teach her to spin on an Ashford?

Well, spinning relies on body memory as does riding a bike, and with such a quick learner it was easy-peasy.

That led me on to 'Wonderwool Wales' in April 2019, where I was really excited to see the vast array of ready washed and dyed wools. But I was disappointed that spinners now appear to start less often from the basics. To me this means commencing with fleece 'in the grease', and thus being able to appreciate the natural qualities and differences. These days I suspect there is less enjoyment of 'the journey', with more emphasis placed on end results?



2019 Hedgehog Drum Carder



Wonderwool Wonders

I was interested that my development of the 'Indian Spinner Head' has never really caught on. Ashford wheels come the closest, with their (optional) large spinning orifices and jumbo bobbins, but there may be an opportunity here for some more improvisation ?

I was also most excited when the Guilds of Weavers, Spinners & Dyers representative suggested that as the original developer of drum carders in the UK, I should write the story of 'The Original Mr Hedgehog', as seen through my own eyes.

You have just read it!



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Tim Willcocks

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 - WSP Textiles, Stroud 01453-764456.
- WSP make billiard cloth and tennis ball coverings. Nappe was raised by genuine teasles until 1993 but left it streaky, so other processing now used (Stuart at Lodgemore Mills).