

Christmas all sewn up

inspiring a more creative approach to the gifting season, **Maria Fitzpatrick** discovers

JOHN LAWRENCE; GIANNI DILBERTO; D. HURST / ALAMY

'Knitted" used to be shorthand for a sinking feeling on December 25. But now that the world and its mother (and its fashionable sister) is taking up the needles again, wool, with all its gloom-busting comfort and cosiness, is top of the Christmas wishlists. The catwalks are swathed in chunky cable-knits and even knitted homeware, once painfully twee, is an object of desire.

For one family-run farm in Rugby, Warwickshire, the increasing demand for knitting yarn has created a whole new purpose: a business, run by Kerry Lord, catering for crafties.

When Rob and Shirley Bettinson, Kerry's parents, bought Toft Farm in 1997, there were fewer than 500 alpacas in the UK. Having no prior experience of the animals, they adventurously picked four at the Royal Agricultural Show - a different colour for each of their children.

"At the time, few people here knew what alpacas were," Kerry says. "My dad, a theatre director, had been in Australia and seen the demand for them there. He decided to start his own stud farm. We now have over 200, though not all bred from the originals."

Alpacas, gentle, easy-to-handle creatures about 5ft 2in tall, are popular as guard animals for chickens, and there are now 30,000 of them in the UK. Whether you use their fleece or not, they have to be fleeced once a year. "The fleece was a bi-product," Kerry says. "Mum and Dad had a bash at doing some yarn, but it was quite stringy. I decided to investigate grading the fleece properly."

Alpaca fleece is affected by their age, quality of pedigree and health, and only the most luxurious is made into yarn, known for being supremely soft. The yarn is now in great demand and the farm is the UK's leading producer of luxury alpaca wool. As



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To make Toft Alpaca's felted and knitted Christmas tree baubles, see telegraph.co.uk/christmas

people looking to buy yarn were the hardcore knitters who had been doing it forever. Now, most of our customers are in their twenties and thirties, learning how to knit. "Amazingly enough, we've been inundated with teenagers prepared to spend £30 on two balls of 'chunky weight' yarn to make a snood themselves - they have full faith they can do it using YouTube - instead of buying one for £8 in Primark." Kerry had never knitted herself before taking on the

The knit before Christmas: Kerry Lord from Toft Farm says demand for the super soft alpaca yarns, knitwear and knitting courses has rocketed this year

yarn project, and we with an elderly knitter from Sussex, renowned for skills, who was happy on her knowledge for Kerry then brought Gardner-Pett, who I since childhood, and them they teach we on the farm, where also bring their craft for advice. "Non-knitters can be intimidated by real people, but if I can show them they can do that in their own homes, they believe it can be done." The classes all start with a tour, where the alpacas meet the knitters and learn about how the grading works. "Learning in person is the best because the alpacas make you feel like you've come from. And each alpaca has its own character to you."

KNIT YOUR OWN SIMPLE RIB ALPACA COWL

Skill level: Very easy
Time to knit: 2 hrs
You will need: 200g Toft Chunky British Alpaca Yarn; 12mm circular (60cm) or straight needle



The whole cowl is in this basic rib pattern. Continue with this rib pattern until you have approximately 1m of yarn left. Cast off and then sew up side seams if knitted flat. Handwash and dry flat.

Learn to knit a stocking (Dec 9) make baubles (Dec 10)