

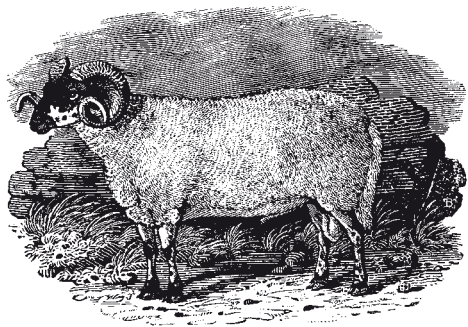
Many spinners are intimidated by thought of dealing with an entire raw fleece, but it's just a matter of having a spare few hours, a reasonable amount of space, and some common sense. When in doubt whether to keep or discard a *staple* or *lock*¹ of fleece, consider the time needed to wash, prep and spin yarn from the fleece you're assessing – and remember, the sheep are growing more even as you look at it!

Equipment and preparation

Even if the fleece has come from a small sheep, it will stretch alarmingly as it is unrolled, it will smell very sheepy, and will generate a lot of dust, dirt and bits of vegetation. It's best to do this outside if possible, on an old sheet in the garden or a quiet corner of a parking lot. If not, you can work indoors, even drape the fleece over a table – but cover the table and floor with old sheets. A skirting table of coarse chicken wire stretched over a frame will allow second cuts and debris to fall through, and may be useful if you deal with many fleeces.

Have several large bags ready for the various grades of wool and the bits to be discarded. Plastic is fine in the short term, but over time fleece stored in plastic may become musty due to damp. Old pillowcases work well, and may be found in charity shops.

¹ The fleece tends to form natural clumps of fibres. These are known as staples in fine wools, locks in longwools.



An 18th century woodcut of a Heath Ram of the Improved Breed

Contacts and links

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The Rare Breeds Survival Trust www.rbst.org.uk

The British Coloured Sheep Breeders Association
www.bcsba.org.uk

The Natural Fibre Company offers fleece processing and spinning services, as well as fleece FAQ sheets for download.

www.thenaturalfibre.co.uk



The Natural Fibre Company

The Association of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers is the parent body for over 100 local guilds in the UK and through the Online Guild has members in many countries worldwide. It is our remit to preserve, improve and promote expertise in hand weaving, spinning and dyeing; and to encourage excellence of craftsmanship in texture, colour and design. We support this series of leaflets as we can see positive benefits to all our members. www.wsd.org.uk

Ravelry is a website where knitters, spinners and other fibre craftspeople from across the world meet. There is information about preparing and spinning fleece in some forums, and there are UK-specific groups where you may find information about sources of fleece. www.ravelry.com

This leaflet is one of a series planned for free distribution to encourage and improve links between UK wool producers and handspinners.

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THE WOOL CLIP
For all things woollen

A Cumbrian co-operative of wool workers & producers, members of which organise Woolfest.

woolfest

Grading and Sorting a HANDSPINNING fleece



Often associated with flax spinning, a distaff may also hold combed woollen top. Redrawn from a woodcut of the Middle Ages.

Unrolling the fleece

As you unroll the fleece, check the cut surface of the fleece for *second* or *double cuts*, tufts up to 1 7/25mm long created when the shearer goes over an area twice. Discard these whenever you find them, as they'll create nepps and lumps in the yarn if you card it. Sometimes a good shake will loosen them.

After shearing the wrapper rolls the fleece into a cylinder, cut side out to protect the staples. The British Wool Marketing Board method is to bring each side to the midline, then roll the fleece up starting at the tail or britch end. The neck is drawn out, twisted, and used to secure the roll. This means that the first bit you unroll should be the head end; mark or remember this as you unroll the fleece. Don't expect it to look exactly like the diagram! Once off the sheep the fleece will stretch into almost any shape. Just try to make it roughly sheep-shaped. Compare the staples at each end: the tail end may contain some manure, the fibres will be coarser and may contain more *kemp*, relatively thick and harsh pale hairs, often dead white or reddish. The best quality fleece, with finest, cleanest staples, is on the shoulders followed by the flanks, the base of the neck and the hips.

As you move your hands over the fleece, it should open easily with natural gaps forming between the staples. Always part the fleece along one of these gaps. Use your hands, never scissors or anything sharp. If the fleece doesn't part easily and the staples have to be torn apart, it may be cotted: felted while still on the sheep. Cotted areas of fleece should be discarded unless there's enough fibre left to spin if you cut the cotting off the staple.

Wise precautions

Even if it looks clean, raw fleece contains farmyard dust and dirt. Store your fleeces away from food, pets and children. Everyone should wash their hands thoroughly after handling a fleece, wet or dry. Avoid getting wash water in open cuts.

Skirting the fleece

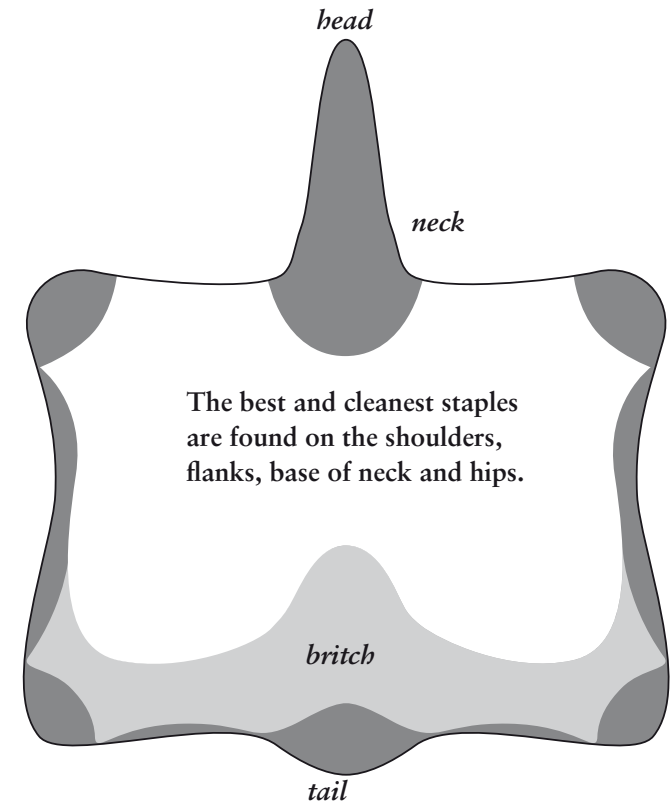
A handspinning fleece should have been skirted before you bought it. If you find a lot of waste, tell the person you bought it from: without feedback, they won't know there is a problem.




Skirt your fleece rigorously: the areas most likely to be manure-stained or dirty are of almost no value to spinners. Remove them and any lumps of dirt or manure elsewhere on the fleece while picking off second cuts and as much vegetable matter as you can. Dispose of all of this in a way that minimises any possibility of spreading animal disease. Put it in the non-compostible rubbish, or bury it deeply in the garden or in an active compost heap. Don't leave it out where birds or other animals could carry it away.

Grading the fleece

Discard areas of the fleece that you decide are too coarse or kempy for any purpose. Bear in mind, though, that different grades of fleece make perfectly good yarns for different purposes: something that isn't soft enough for a cardigan or fine enough for lace may still make sturdy socks or a good rug yarn. Split the fleece into 2, 3 or 4 grades based on your personal assessment of staple length, quality, and cleanness. Be rigorous here, too: you'll have to invest a lot of time in washing, drying, prepping and spinning to make yarn from fleece; it's not worth spending that time on fibre that will not make the yarn you want.

If you've broken the fleece down by fineness, you could further divide the best-quality fleece by staple length, picking out the longest staples to be combed and spun worsted. If you have a variegated fleece, you could wash the different colours separately to spin for stranded knitting, or to blend to create colour gradients. Sorting and grading your own fleece gives you the freedom to be even more creative in your spinning.



-  The belly, shanks and legs are of little use to spinners. The fibres are often short, coarse, kempy and fouled by manure and mud. The neck can be good if clean, but is often full of vegetable matter.
-  Britch or rump and haunches carry coarser fibre, often with some kemp. Even if too coarse for clothing this wool may be useful for weaving rugs or felting.
-  First quality fibre with a relatively even staple length.

based on Teal, *Hand Woolcombing and Spinning*