

Focus on Fiber: Stansborough Grey, The Making of A Breed

August 4th, 2010 by talia



Norrie, a much beloved sheep! ©Stansborough

Introduction:

My introduction to the Stansborough Grey breed came quite by accident. I was trawling around the internet looking for information on the fiber used to make the costumes in the *Lord of the Rings* movies finding a lot of references to Gotland – a mistake made by many, myself included. As I kept looking, a different name started to appear, the Stansborough Grey. That got my attention. Stansborough Grey? I had never heard of a breed of that name. After some detective work, I was able to ferret out the one and only source of this amazing wool, Stansborough Farm, Wairarapa district, New Zealand. (Two hours north of Wellington.)

History of The Breed:

From the *Heimskringla, Saga of Olaf Haraldson: Part IV:123*:

“The ship was good, all that belonged to her was of the best, and in the sails were stripes of cloth of various colours.”



Replica of the Viking ship, the Gokstad, at the Chicago World Fair 1893.

The history of Stansborough Grey sheep goes all the way back to the Vikings. They are direct descendants of the Goth sheep, one of the breeds of sheep whose wool was used to make the sails for the Viking ships. According to Swedish wool experts who visited Stansborough Farm, the Stansborough Grey is closer in bodily appearance and wool quality to the original sheep than the modern Gotland sheep. The Goth sheep of yesteryear was finer boned, with tighter crimped and highly lustrous fleece. They were quite unlike their modern Gotland descendants who are mostly larger boned, with coarser wool perfect for pelt production, but not as desirable for weaving textiles. (For more information about the Gotland sheep, see our Focus on Fiber: Gotland article.)

Fast-forward to the 1980's, LambXL imported the first Gotland sheep to New Zealand with several other breeds of sheep to explore the possibility of introducing them to the country. Each flock raised had a specific end purpose, like pelts, meat, and wool. Semen and embryos were collected and sold to breeders as well. Unfortunately, the Share Market Crash in 1987 left a lot of companies over extended including LambXL, which had to close its doors. The Gotland sheep flocks were sold off. Many flocks of 8 – 20 animals were sold to small farms, which were most often crossed through the years with other breeds. There have been no other imports of Gotland sheep to New Zealand since that original flock.

Enter Cheryl and Barry Eldridge, co-operators and owners of Stansborough Farm. LambXL sold the last 350 sheep, remaining embryos, and semen samples to the Eldridges. There is scant remaining paperwork to trace what happened to the small flocks, but LambXL and Stansborough Farm have kept a continuous record with the New Zealand Sheep Breeders Association concerning the Stansborough flock. The Eldridge's focus has been to bring out the finer qualities of the fleece, instead of emphasizing their efforts on the meat and pelt market. This has led to a superior lustrous fleece.



Stansborough Fleece ©Stansborough

The sheep have never been crossbred and the Eldridge's keep strict records. The veterinary embryologist, Dr Trevor Cook, who worked for LambXL with the original, imported Gotland flock of the '80s, has worked with the Stansborough flock since the beginning. With Dr Cook's help, the Eldridge's have been able to grow their flock from 350 sheep to 1200 relying on good flock management and the semen and embryo stores that they purchased in the 1990s. The best of the rams' semen throughout the last twenty years has been frozen to preserve the flock into the future. Due to their precise record keeping, preservation of the flock's pure status, and a very well thought out breeding program, the Stansborough Grey has earned the status of a distinct registered breed.

Once registered as the Stansborough Gotland, the New Zealand Sheep Breeders Association requested that the name be changed to Stansborough Grey. After the success of the *Fellowship of the Ring* film, there was actually a counterfeit market of imposter Stansborough Grey wool, which was mostly coarse Gotland Pelt fleece or crosses. The New Zealand Sheep Breeders Association thought the sheep was significantly different from the Gotland sheep with a proven and traceable history of not only genetic lines but also a distinct confirmation and fleece characteristics due to the Eldridge's breeding program. These facts paved the way for the Stansborough Grey to change its breed registration and status from the Stansborough Gotland to the unique, new breed, the Stansborough Grey in 2005.

Breed Characteristics:



Barry Eldridge, co-owner of Stansborough Farm & Greybeard ©Stansborough

The Stansborough Grey sheep is a fine boned animal that exudes intelligence and is easy to manage. They have clear black heads and legs, neither sex are horned, and their short tails do not need docking. The Stansborough Grey has developed into a hardy breed that thrives in hilly

areas. They love to feed on the variety of food available there, for example gorse, scrub, and native grass species. They also enjoy meadow hay and lucerne (alfalfa) in their diet.

The Wool:



Stansborough Grey wool has a beautiful look and feel. The delight in handling it gives one a sense that magic could not be far away. The wool ranges from dark to light grey and has an intense luster and clear tone. It has a bluish tinge with no brown tips, guard hairs, or kemp that may be found in Gotland Pelt fleeces. The sheep are shorn two times a year producing a staple length of about 3-4 inches as this is considered the best length for the Stansborough textiles. The crimp is tighter than most long wools but still maintains the desirable soft curls. The lambswool is very soft with a fineness of approximately 22 microns. The adult fleeces measure in at about 28 microns. Stansborough Grey fleece has a lower than average level of lanolin, which gives a high yield of clean wool weight with a loss of about 20% after scouring. The small amount of lanolin allows the scouring to be done quickly, however, care must be taken so as not to felt the fiber.

Stansborough Grey is used in high-end textiles for baby wear, outerwear, blankets and throws, cloaks, and for interior design. The handspinner will find that this fiber is best used with a high dose of imagination. The sky is the limit.

The Movies:



Image & design ©Stansborough

So how did Stansborough wool come to the attention of the makers of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy? Luck was on their side. The costume designer for the *Lord of the Rings* came across the Eldridge's fashion textiles in an office in New York City. She was impressed by their beauty and flew to New Zealand to discuss the requirements for the movie. After an exhausting three-month journey that was an epic in its own right, the Eldridge's were able to produce the fabric for the cloaks worn by the principle characters in the *Fellowship of The Ring*. A dynasty had been born.



Gandalf's Cloak, Image & design ©Stansborough



LOTR Fabric, image & design ©Stansborough

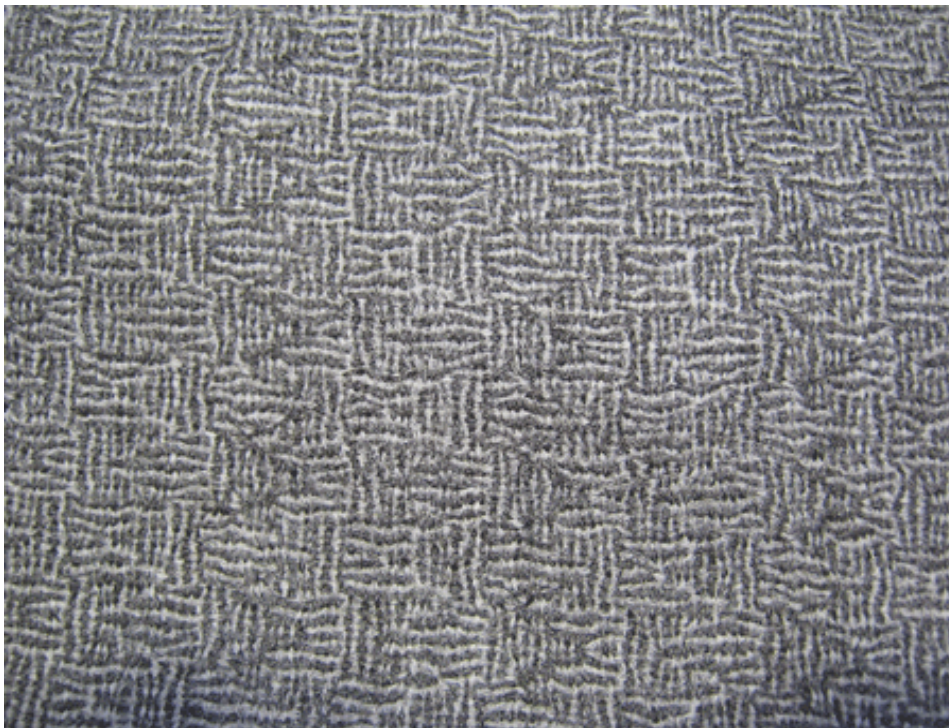
Film makers were so enthralled by the mystical quality of the fabric and its on-screen beauty that the Eldridge's historic mill, in Wellington, NZ, has been very busy ever since. Where else can you see their fabric? The films *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Prince Caspian*, *The Waterhorse*, BBC's *Kidnapped*, *Kingdom Come*, *Avatar*, and several other large movies use these unique fabrics.

The Textiles:



Centaur red fabric, image & design ©Stansborough

Stansborough Grey fabrics are highly prized. Some of their fashion clients include Saks Fifth Avenue, Donna Karan, Neiman Marcus, Molton Brown, Liberty, Holt Renfrew, and David Jones. So what does it take to make such wonderful fabrics and why are they so unusual? Having a family owned business that stresses earth-friendly production from sheep to finished product on an industrial scale is the real secret. After developing, maintaining, and furthering the desirable fleece characteristics that make for a superior yarn with excellent sheen and drape, the Eldridge's sought out an eco-friendly wool processor to scour and spin their yarn to exacting specifications.



Taipo fabric, image & design ©Stansborough

All the wool from the main clip is sorted into three different shades, from light to dark, then sent to the processor arriving back at the weaving mill. The weaving patterns are original creations by Cheryl Eldridge. She is inspired by nature, which gives a universal appeal to her designs. Her visions become reality by Barry Eldridge and Richard Graham, who both operate the antique Yorkshire Hattersley looms. These rare looms date back to the early 1890s and were the first industrial looms of their time. The warping alone can be a two-day enterprise. All the fabrics are traditionally finished giving each piece a handcrafted look and feel. It is a labor-intensive process from start to finish with the results coming from a superior fiber that lends itself perfectly to a high quality textile.

What's Next?



LOTR Weaving Yarn & Fleece, ©Stansborough

The Eldridge's have tested a new outstanding 8-ply knitting yarn. They have over-dyed the medium grey shade of Stansborough Grey wool with five biodegradable, acid free dyes. They chose these dyes since they are colorfast, use no harmful mordants, and are safe for the environment. As the testing went so well, they are now feeling out the market to see if there is interest in these yarns. I think it is safe to say: "Yes!"

Many thanks to Cheryl Eldridge for her generous sharing of pictures and information used to write this article.

Please note that all images provided by Stansborough Farm and all designs are copyrighted.

Resources:

Eldridge, Cheryl, "Silver Screen Appeal", Twist Magazine, The Knowledge Section, World Textile Publications Ltd, West Yorkshire, UK, Issue 23, July/August 2010, UK, pp 14-15, ISSN: 1759-0418

Fournier, Nola, "The Stansborough Gotland Sheep", Spin-Off Magazine, Spring 2002, Interweave Press, Loveland, CO, pp 34-36

New Zealand Sheep Breeders Association, About Us Section, <http://www.nzsheep.co.nz/site/aboutus.htm>, Retrieved August 1, 2010.

Sturluson, Snorri, Laing, Samuel, translator "Heimskringla: A History of the Norse Kings", Norroena Society, London, 1907, <http://omacl.org/Heimskringla/haraldson4.html>, Retrieved August 3, 2010.

Te Ara, Stock Market Crash, <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/wellington-region/11/2>. Retrieved August 1, 2010.