



Him Outback: My Aussie Alpaca Odyssey

*At the beginning of January 2006, **Harry Douglas** had the opportunity to work for three months on Flowerdale Estate in Australia – the home of Flowerdale Estate Alpacas. This is the story of how he came to work at Flowerdale, the experiences he had there and what he learnt from his stay on this leading Aussie alpaca farm.*

I went to a boarding school called Uppingham in the county of Rutland, about two hours north of London. I had a good time there and made some great friends, but I left, tired of academic work by three straight years of important exams and I really wanted to take a gap year before I went on to university. Lots of my friends taking gap years were going abroad to teach in schools around the world, however this held very little appeal for me and I wanted to do something different.

Just a few months before I left school my parents bought our first four alpacas. Their intention was to build up Fallowfield Alpacas, over time, into a well known high quality herd. I became quite interested in alpacas as I helped to look after our animals. When my parents came home from an alpaca seminar in possession of an Australian alpaca breeder directory, my mother and I had a brainwave. I could go and work on an alpaca farm in Australia for three months – this would be doing something I found fascinating and in a place I had wanted to go to for a long time. After I had worked on the alpaca farm I would then go travelling with some friends for my remaining three months in Australia. I was very pleased with myself for having thought of an actual plan until I quickly realised the potential difficulties. Only the bigger breeders would have a sufficient number of animals to warrant employing someone full-time to work on the farm. Also, who would take the risk of employing a nineteen year old stranger, from the other side of the world, who had just left school? As you can imagine, doubts were starting to enter my mind as I wrote my CV.

Selecting Appropriate Aussie Breeders

I picked out several breeders in the main states of Victoria and New South Wales and after a week of nervous yet eager anticipation, I got a reply from one of the breeders. The reply was very polite but simply stated that the farm in question was not big enough to warrant employing another person full-time for three months. I had thought this might happen from the start and did not expect to get any positive replies following the first one, but two days later, I received an email from Jeffry Farman, the owner of Flowerdale Estate Alpacas, expressing an interest.

After two references and several emails over the following three weeks, Jeffry Farman and I reached an agreement and he sent me my job description and a contract to sign. My gap year was now coming together. Then I needed a visa. I was pleasantly surprised by how easy it all was. I

selected the Working Holiday Visa as that allowed me to stay in Australia for up to twelve months and to work for a maximum of three months for each employer.

Once this was done, all I had left to do was complete my travel arrangements and buy everything I needed to spend six months working and travelling in Australia. I did not really know what to expect of Australia, but some of the initial thoughts that came to mind were of kangaroos and lots of Aussies drinking Fosters. On a more serious note, I expected Australia to be quite different to the UK but apart from obvious factors such as weather, I did not know how that might be.

The Journey Begins

Christmas passed and the date of departure, the 7th January, was soon upon me. After a very comfortable flight with Virgin Atlantic and a quick stop in Hong Kong, I arrived in Sydney on the 9th January with a short transfer flight on to Melbourne. I was met there by Jeffry Farman who had told me in an earlier email that I would recognise him by his large farm hat. At the time I thought this was quite a vague thing to look for until I walked out of the terminal and spotted the only person there wearing an Aussie bush hat. We introduced ourselves then made our way up to Flowerdale – about an hour's drive north of Melbourne where I met Haydn Farman, the farm manager at Flowerdale, whom I would be working with for most of my stay.

Flowerdale Estate is an historic site. The land was settled by a Scottish soldier, Captain Farquhar McKenzie, in 1838. The 150 acre property has been continuously farmed since 1842. McKenzie travelled overland from New South Wales, on horseback, with four colleagues taking 10,000 acres for a sheep and cattle run, originally known as Flowerdale Station.

Today, Flowerdale Estate is owned by Jeffry and Carol Farman. The property includes a 30 bedroom conference centre, used by some of the largest companies and organisations in Australia, for their management training events and residential meetings and also, a premium quality alpaca stud farm.

Flowerdale Estate Alpacas runs 180 alpacas in all colours, but predominantly white and light fawn. The farm is involved in embryo transfer and is one of a handful of SRS Seedstock Producers. The conference venue on the property runs residential workshop weekends for new breeders.

The owners are very active in the show scene having won many broad ribbons for their alpacas in recent years. In 2004 they put together the internationally focused Alpacaganza "Five Star Auction" which was attended by breeders from the UK, Peru, New Zealand and Europe. Two of the higher priced alpacas were bought by UK buyers.

Some Early Experiences

My first week at Flowerdale was one of acclimatisation to the very hot weather and several new experiences. On my first day I had a go at doing something I had never even considered that I might try – shearing - the alpaca and I are both still alive to tell the tale. Whilst we were shearing the alpacas I learnt a lot more about how to grade the quality of the fleece properly and several positive or negative factors to particularly look out for. The first thing Haydn and I did the next day was to drive into Seymour, the nearest local town, about 35 minutes away, to look for a pair of good serviceable farm boots as well as a few other supplies, after which we returned to the farm to start some animal husbandry.

Every animal in the herd needed four vaccinations and many also needed their toenails clipped. With the Flowerdale herd of 180 animals this initially seemed like a daunting task, even to get each group of animals to the shearing shed where all aspects of animal husbandry are carried out. However, with the use of well thought out lane-ways and catch pens this was much easier than it sounds – proved by the fact that one person can round up and move large groups of animals around the farm quite easily. There were about forty alpacas in the first group and using the automatic reloading vaccine guns we got through the group in just over three hours in temperatures of about 40 degrees Celsius.

Kangaroos Everywhere

Over the next few days we concentrated on more animal husbandry and weed control as many of the thistles were getting close to seeding. On a couple of occasions after a hard days work, Jeffry or Haydn and I would go out trail riding on motor bikes. This usually took us through the large pine forest, adjacent to the property where I saw some great views and lots of kangaroos.

The nearest place of any consequence to Flowerdale Estate, having a pub and a small general store, is the little hamlet of Strath Creek, five kilometres down the road. Every Friday night there is a local community barbecue in the park there, which we attended during my first week at Flowerdale. There are normally between twenty or thirty people at the barbecue and you need to take all of your own food and drink with you. Everyone was very friendly and welcoming and there was the odd joke about the 'bloody poms' to which, in reply, I only had to mention the cricket and rugby to put the Aussies in their place.

Jeffry and I had just finished our food when a thunderstorm with torrential rain started suddenly, completely soaking everyone to the skin. At this point we decided to leave.

Weekend Workshop a Bonus

On the second weekend of my stay at Flowerdale I was lucky enough to be involved in one of their weekend alpaca workshops for new breeders. Attending this workshop was a real bonus. Even though I'm not a complete beginner, I learnt quite a lot from it myself. There are a maximum of 18 guests at each two day workshop weekend. Half the time is spent in the conference room talking about many aspects of alpaca ownership. The other half is spent outside in the shearing shed getting some hands-on experience with the alpacas. This includes vaccines, toe-nail clipping, chuckering, body-condition scoring and halter training. Being able to use the residential conference facilities makes Flowerdale the perfect venue for these workshop weekends, and there was a lot of positive feedback from the guests when they left on Sunday evening.

Over the first month I did all the usual farm tasks and animal husbandry and also spent time helping prepare the animals Flowerdale entered in the Canberra Royal Show on the 25th and 26th February. This involved tidying up the fleeces, if necessary and also halter training those animals that had not previously been to shows.

Next Time

It's a very busy time at Flowerdale right now and I look forward to sharing future experiences with you in Part 2 of my Odyssey. These will include the participation in the Canberra Royal and

Wodonga shows, where I expect to have my first experience showing animals, participation in the Seymour Alternative Farm Expo with 35,000 visitors, a visit to the Elmore Cultivation Field day, the mating of 60 females and the birthing season that is about to start with 40 new cria expected soon.

They tell me my involvement has been a positive experience for them at the Flowerdale Estate alpaca farm. So there may be future opportunities for young people like me. As a starting point you could visit the website at www.flowerdalealpacas.net