



## ***A Letter From France***

*Andy Spillane reports from France (May 2006)*

May and spring is in full flood in the Dordogne, a few weeks ago literally, with rivers in full spate swollen with much needed rain after last year's drought. Luckily we seem to be getting just enough for hay this season, though the land has not fully recovered from the harsh 2005 summer. The grue, migratory storks, have passed us in their thousands as usual, fortunately without delivering avian flu, and the hoopoe birds have returned to entertain us with their distinctive plumage, crest and calls.

Once again our April was dominated by organising the French International Alpaca & Lama Show for the last weekend in April. This was our second year, the first time anyone has organised it twice. Mistakenly, I thought with year one behind us we had coped with all potential disasters, fool! On the Tuesday before the show the stabling and marquee provider rang to say that their equipment had been destroyed by a freak storm the previous weekend. Three days to find a replacement for the major spring bank holiday weekend. Sounds like something from one of the naff TV challenge shows. We located replacement portable stables and bought eight garden marquees praying to the weather gods. The first animals arrived Friday morning to find stables without roofing.

Nothing happens in France without a meal, Friday night before the show a free BBQ was provided for all competitors and friends, a typical meal of the region. After paté, an eleven kilo hot smoked jambon was followed by several kilos of cheese and 20 litres of wine washed it all down. The show was off to a happy start.

Saturday dawned bright and dry and the judges, Liz Barlow for alpacas and Irving Pallister for lamas, briefed the competitors at 8.30 before two days of steady activity. This year saw more classes, more animals and, most important, more exhibitors. Particularly appreciated was the entry of animals from three major UK breeders, The Alpaca Stud, Classical Mile End Alpacas and Popham Alpacas. Their excellent animals, together with some new imports into France, really lifted the quality of stock on show this year and proved an eye opener for several breeders as to the real potential for quality in alpacas. Another first was the inclusion of four breeders of suri, previously extremely rare in France, again of high quality.

Sunday saw over 30,000 visitors to the show and superb final line ups for supreme champions in both lama & alpaca classes. Although not in the ribbons, it was wonderful to see Isabelle Delavallade's llama Windwalker, despite his 18 years he was still superbly fit and majestic as ever, taking the Show Presidents special trophy. Both judges commented on the quality of animals presented and Irving in particular on the bone and conformation of the lamas.

Two days later we went into shearing. Tim Hey kindly came over to help so we were well prepared this year after the problems of heat last summer. A seventy two hour visit and sixty alpacas shorn, leaving everyone exhausted but happy. Let us hope for a quiet summer.