

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH YOUR FLEECE

BUYING:

KNOWN SUPPLIER: If you know & trust the supplier then order type, colour and quantity with confidence.

UNKNOWN SUPPLIER: Decide on type and colour but ask to inspect the fleece before buying if possible.

MAIL ORDER: Check the following points –

Is the fleece well skirted (no heavily soiled areas at britch, belly and tail)?

Is it sound (no weakness in the staple)?

Is there any crotting?

Is it generally free from vegetable matter?

If the vendor can't or won't answer these questions do you want the fleece?

PRESENTATION: After shearing, fleece is normally laid cut side down on the table, ready for skirting and wrapping. It is wrapped by folding one side in towards the middle (down the length of the fleece) then the other side over the top of that. It is then rolled from the tail end towards the head end, in a reasonably firm 'sausage'.

TO UNWRAP: Remove the fleece from its packaging very carefully and place it on a large, flat surface. Turn the rolled fleece gently until the open end can be seen then unroll it. Fold out the upper side then fold out the other side. Your fleece should now be lying tips uppermost and roughly sheepcoat-shaped! **See diagram.**

QUALITY: In general, the best quality fibre is in the head and shoulder areas deteriorating gradually towards the tail. The range in fibre quality depends somewhat on the breed of sheep. Mountain breeds will tend to be coarse and probably kempy, to turn the rain and keep out the wind. Lowland and selectively bred breeds may show much less variation in fibre quality. (eg. Herdwick versus Southdown)

Consider choosing the breed of sheep to suit your intended end product – Lace Knitting Or Rug Making??

SORTING: Unless you are planning a really 'rough' mat/rug or maybe some coarse felt, remove and discard the **belly wool** (see 5), any seriously greasy 'armpits' and any soiled bits. These are all good for the runner bean trench.

Next take a good look at the centre of the fleece just behind the head and running down the back (8). This area is sometimes very dry and crinkled, you may want to put it aside. In New Zealand this bit of fleece is routinely removed by the roller, at shearing! Now you can inspect the **head** area and decide whether it is of high enough quality to need separating from the **shoulder wool** (see 1 and 2 on diagram). Sometimes the fine wool around the head and neck is badly contaminated with hay seed etc., and heavily felted under the chin. The felted stuff is no use – bin it. If you are very patient it may be worth picking out vegetable matter but if not just cut your losses and dispose of contaminated fleece.

Check the sides of the shoulder areas as this is sometimes cotted. If crotting is light the fibre can be used, if it's heavy then discard the bad part.

Moving on to the **back (3)** and **Rump (4)**, you will have to look carefully and decide whether there is any great difference in quality between the two. This is often breed dependant.

Britch and **tail areas (6 & 7)** will usually be of inferior quality so separate them and use them for a suitable 'hard wearing' project.

GENERAL COMMENTS:

If the overall appearance of your fleece is even you may not need to divide it up into all the suggested areas. Sometimes a really good fleece can be used more or less as a whole. The belly and britch areas are almost always inferior but otherwise, as you work, your fingers will tell you how things are going!

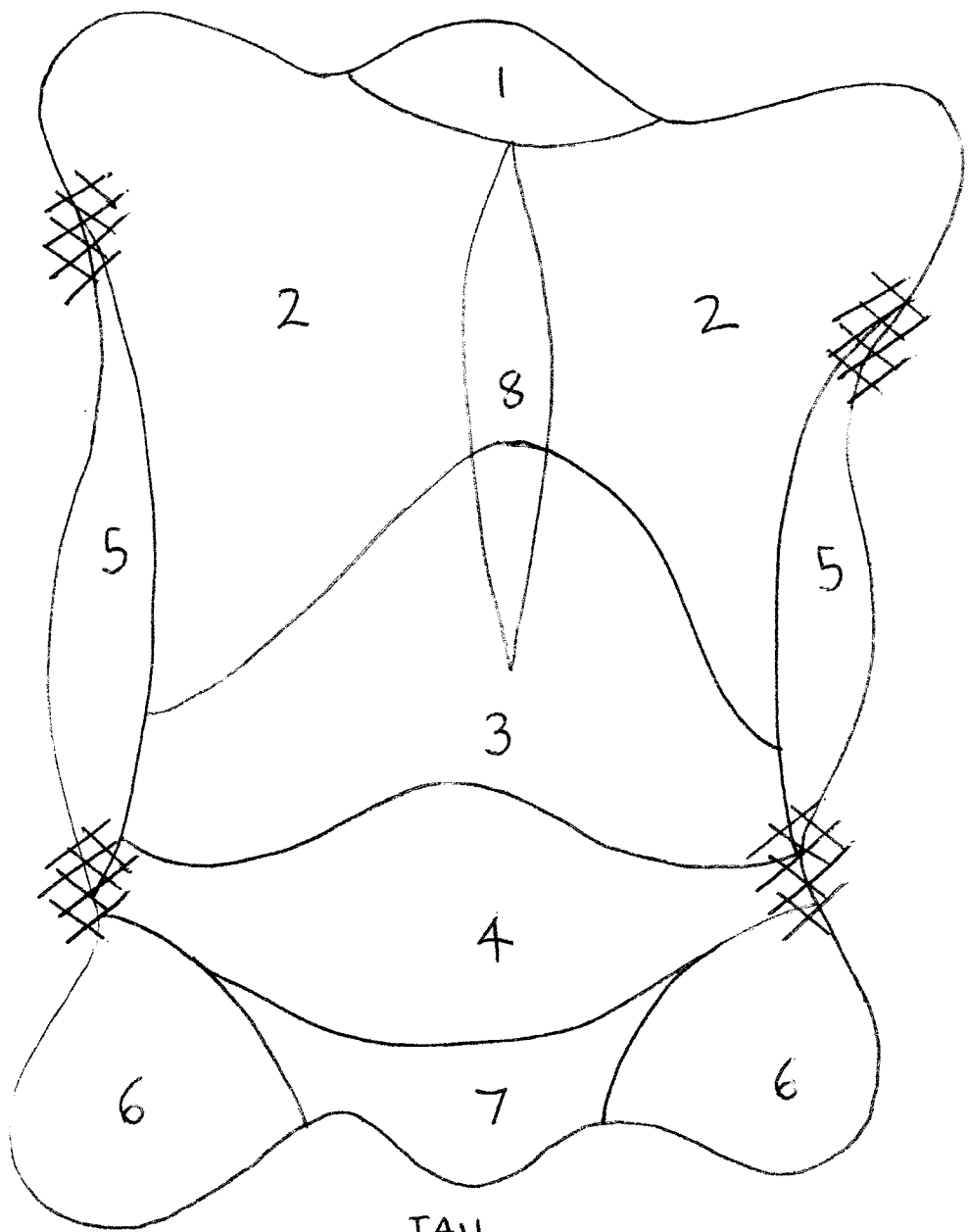
If your fleece is from a Hill or Mountain breed you will have kemp to deal with. The worst areas are the britch and tail and sometimes a ruff of coarse wool/kemp around the neck.

It is helpful to read about sheep breeds and the nature of their wool so that you develop an idea of which breed will suit your different projects. The BWMB produces a useful book on British Breeds and sometimes the NSA has something similar available.

Try not to be seduced by colour alone! Always satisfy yourself that the fleece is a good one not just a pretty colour.

If you attend shows where a variety of sheep breeds are on display, ask questions, ask to handle the sheep or fleeces on display. There are so many wonderful types of fleece available and there is always more to learn.

HEAD END



TAIL
END

1 HEAD

2 SHOULDER

3 BACK

4 RUMP

5 BELLY

6 BRITCH

7 TAIL

8 DRY 'SPINE'



GREASY 'ARMPIT'