



# Playing the *stock market*

Seven years ago Hilary Shenton traded in a successful company in London for a herd of alpacas and a converted cowshed in Herefordshire. Today she is enjoying the benefits of a business and passion combined

Words by Rachael Oakden Photographs by Cristian Barnett



In the corner of a paddock on the Herefordshire-Worcestershire border an unusual game of Twister is taking place.

Biscuit, a fawn-coloured alpaca, has his neck coiled round the front leg of his neighbour, two-year-old Helado. As their owner, Hilary Shenton, approaches, smiling at Biscuit's acrobatics and softly repeating his name, he unwraps himself, extends his fleecy neck upwards to double his height and gazes at her from beneath the woolly pom-pom that sits between his ears like a toupee.

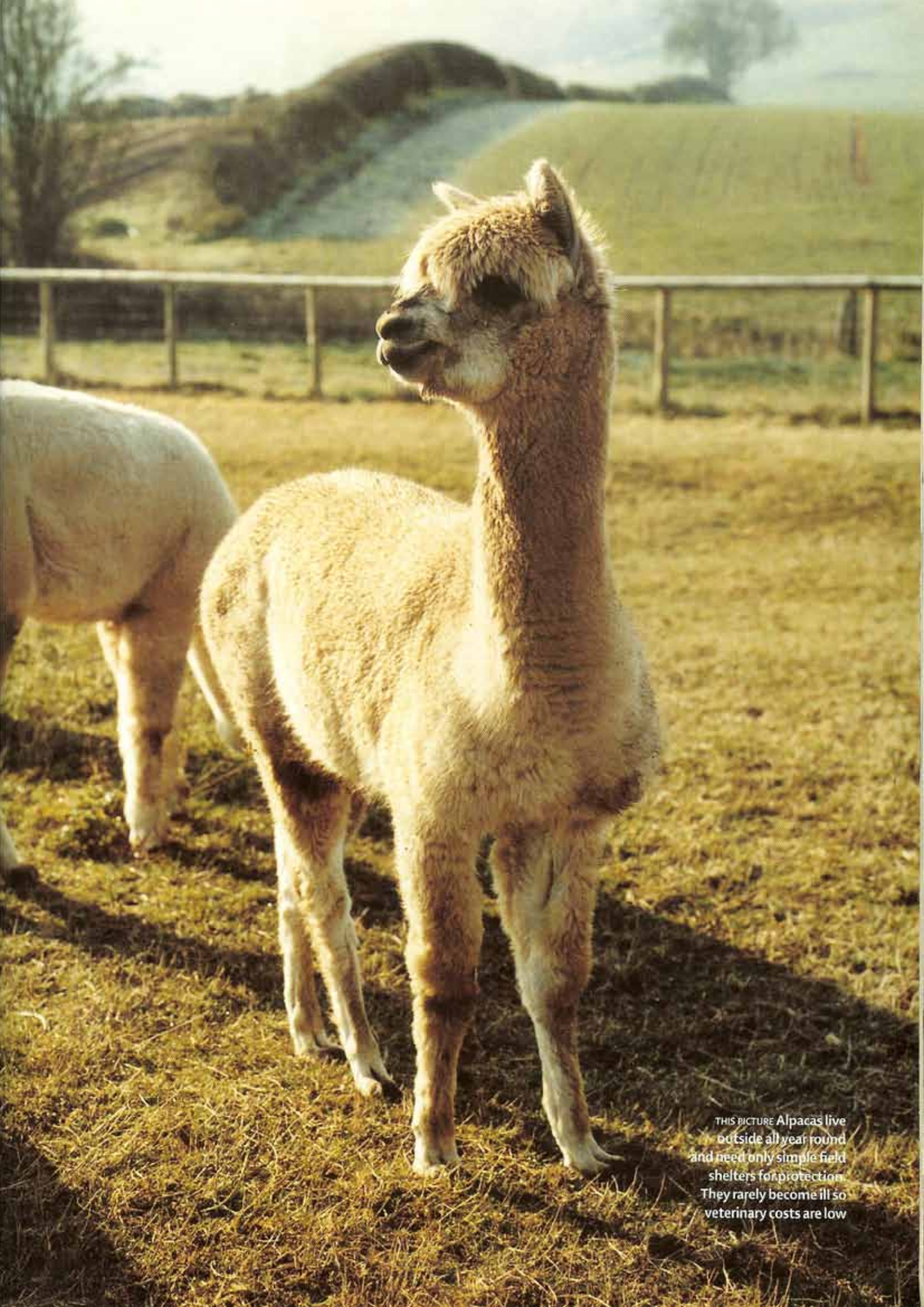
Hilary has a name for each of her 50 alpacas and can recognise every one of these petite, camel-like creatures from halfway across a field. But although she cherishes them as affectionately as her two cavalier King Charles spaniels and two rescued donkeys, they are far more valuable to her than pets. Worth between £6,000 and £12,000 each, these animals are walking investments – her livelihood, her

security and her pension. "Some people fall in love with them and can't bear to sell them, but I am firm with myself," she says.

Since becoming a commercial breeder five years ago, Hilary has grown from a novice who'd never heard of alpacas to a self-taught guru who makes a living by selling her expertise. As well as travelling the country setting up herds for new breeders, she judges at shows, runs training courses at home and has even developed a range of alpaca knitwear.

It was a friend who, in 1998, suggested that she start breeding these South American distant cousins of llamas and camels, which had begun appearing in the British countryside. Hilary had just sold the healthcare recruitment company she'd founded in London 24 years earlier and wanted to start a new business she could run from her north Oxfordshire home. "I didn't know what an alpaca looked like, so I started researching them on the internet," she says. "They were so expensive I thought there had to be a ▷

ABOVE Hilary's Herefordshire barn has views across the Teme Valley. TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT She knows each of her alpacas by name. CENTRE LEFT Alpaca wool can be made into rugs or finely woven into worsted cloth



THIS PICTURE Alpacas live outside all year round and need only simple field shelters for protection. They rarely become ill so veterinary costs are low



## *Hilary has grown from a novice who'd never heard of alpacas to a self-taught guru selling her expertise*

good business in them, because you couldn't afford to keep them as a hobby."

She discovered that they are bred for their fleece, which comes in 22 colours, from white to black and every shade of cream, oatmeal, caramel, ginger, coffee and chocolate in between. At its finest it is as soft as cashmere but much warmer and stronger than wool. "In America and Australia there was a lucrative market for alpaca fleece, but in Britain there were only half a dozen commercial breeders," she says. Knowing a smart business idea when she saw one, Hilary was hooked.

Having kept and shown a small herd of Dexter cattle, Hilary was already an enthusiastic amateur stockwoman. She made contact with alpaca experts in the UK and overseas and read copiously about husbandry. Eventually she met some breeders and finally, in 1999, welcomed two pregnant alpacas to her home near Banbury. "I was blessed by them giving birth to two girls, and then I bought two more pregnant females. Very soon I had a herd." But the herd was beginning to outgrow Hilary's three acres, so she

and her partner, John Kerley, moved to Redwood Barn, a converted cowshed with stables and 11 acres just inside the Herefordshire border. The view across the Teme Valley from the driveway convinced Hilary to buy it before she'd seen the house.

The property – together with the investment in the alpacas – swallowed the proceeds from Hilary's previous business. "It had to work," she says. "or I would have had to go out and get a job working for someone else, which I knew I'd find difficult." The big challenge was finding advice about care and maintenance. She had to get the information she needed from books and specialist societies. "I bought from established breeders, yet no one asked me if I could provide shelter or enough land. I could have been putting them into a garage for all they knew."

Fortunately alpacas, which have lived high in the Peruvian Andes for thousands of years, have simple needs. "They can be outside all year round and are very hardy. And they are easily trained to accept a lead and halter, so one person can herd them." They are low-maintenance, too. Even the ▷

ABOVE LEFT Hilary doesn't use chemicals in the soil – she prefers a natural approach and too much protein in the grass can make the fibres of the fleeces too thick. LEFT Alpacas yield up to five pounds of fleece a year





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luxurious fleece, which grows up to seven inches long per year, is no trouble.

Hilary spent three years building up her herd, teaching herself about care and breeding as she went. When the time came to start selling the animals, she realised that she could sell her expertise, too. "I decided to give advice and back-up to people setting up herds," she says. Her company is called Zarza (the Spanish word for bramble) and offers a consultancy and herd management service, providing support for new breeders. She has found no shortage of clients. For those with enough money to afford them and land to accommodate them (one acre per five animals), alpacas, which live for 20 years and yield up to five pounds each of valuable fleece per year, make good business sense.

Improving the precious fleece is the goal of every alpaca breeder. It is graded according to uniformity, fineness, length, density, handle (what it feels like), brightness (lustre) and lack of coarse hair (the thick, hollow fibre that makes wool itch). The quality can be affected by

environment and feeding so Hilary adds no chemicals to her soil, uses medicines only when unavoidable and gives the animals holistic supplements: organic cider vinegar and dried seaweed or alfalfa.

To showcase the wool, which is shorn in midsummer, Hilary has developed a range of knitwear with local designer Alison Dupernex. "I needed to show potential breeders what could be done with the fibre," she explains.

As well as promoting her own business, Hilary is an ambassador for alpacas and alpaca fibre: she runs the West region of the British Alpaca Society and British Camelids Association and sits on the board of the British Alpaca Fibre Cooperative, which works to develop a long-term market. Hers is a seven-day-a-week job, but she has no regrets. "I absolutely love what I do," she says. "Every time I sell on some alpacas I get the same buzz all over again. When I go back to see the owners during their first year, and they thank me for all my help, I feel as if I have really guided someone else on the route to a different career." ❖

CENTRE LEFT The alpaca knitwear range is made to order and includes a shrug, cardigan and wrap.  
BELOW LEFT Hilary is experimenting to see what else can be done with the fleeces



## IF I HAD KNOWN THEN WHAT I KNOW NOW

I would have built up a bigger herd earlier. You can't have a viable business if you start off with two animals. I would also take on more help. In a small business you try to do everything yourself.

I also wish I had accessed grants more quickly. Through Business Link Hereford & Worcester, I secured a Business Diversification Grant to launch the knitwear range and a Passport to Export grant to research overseas markets.

### Best decision?

To concentrate on the top end of the market and invest

in high-quality animals that keep their value. It's only through doing it yourself that you learn about the breeding lines.

### Biggest mistake?

I went to lunch with some breeders, had several glasses of wine and got carried away by a picture of an alpaca with her *cria* (baby). The baby was so lovely that I bought them both, then later realised that the mother wasn't as good quality as I'd thought.

### Can you make it pay?

All the profits are going back into the business, so the money doesn't compare

with my old career – I was running an established company. But every year it's doing better, and it's making more than I thought it would.

● To contact Zarza call 01568 750396 or visit [www.zarza-alpacas.co.uk](http://www.zarza-alpacas.co.uk). For more details about alpacas contact The British Alpaca Society Ltd (01225 340640; [www.bas-uk.com](http://www.bas-uk.com)), the British Camelids Association (01608 661893) or The British Alpaca Fibre Cooperative, British Alpaca Ltd (01225 344095; [www.britishalpaca.co.uk](http://www.britishalpaca.co.uk)).

