



Tasmanian sheep breeder Mrs Gillian Thomas and her daughter Wendy with some of her flock. Starting eight years ago with 10 ewes and a ram, she now has more than 200 black sheep. Their naturally coloured wool is much in demand.

Baa, baa, black sheep~ now we need your wool

YOU could be excused for not believing your eyes on the Thomas's property at Longford, Tasmania.

Most of the sheep are black. And those that are not black are either fawn or silver-grey. Anyway, in shepherd's terminology all are "black sheep."

The explanation is that Mr and Mrs R. F. Thomas are raising sheep with coloured wool to supply the rapidly expanding hobby trade.

The popularity of homespun, water-repellent, raw wool, particularly in unusual and beautiful colours straight from the sheep's back — black, chocolate-brown, deep fawn, flecked, silver or blue-grey — is transforming the tradition of the black sheep.

Throughout history, it has been the symbol of disgrace. Firstly to shepherds in

**ESTELLE CAMPBELL
finds out that a bad
character is
making good at last**

their flocks; then, by analogy, among mankind in the family and the community.

Long, long ago the black sheep was thought to bear the devil's mark. For once hard-headed commonsense went hand in hand with superstition.

Because the best prices were for white wool, the black lambs had to be removed from the flock as quickly as possible. So they were the first to go to the butcher.

But now the black sheep is making good. Slim, fair-haired Gillian Thomas owns one of the largest flocks of them in

Australia. Nowadays they are the only sheep on the property, because Mr Thomas concentrates on cattle and crops.

"I was brought up among sheep," said Mrs Thomas, "and I have been interested in sheep and wool most of my life."

Both she and her husband are descended from pioneer Tasmanian families. One of his ancestors is William Field, founder of a well-known family.

The names of the two families are combined in the name of their property, "Gayfield," the first part of which is Mrs Thomas's initials — Gillian Arndell Youl — before her marriage. Field was Mr Thomas's mother's maiden name.

Mr and Mrs Thomas's own family, now grown up, consists of two daughters (one of whom is married) and a son.

Mrs Thomas started her flock about

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Black sheep are also bred in attractive browns and greys.

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eight years ago with 10 black, throwback Corriedale ewes. She bought a black Border Leicester ram in order to obtain long fleece.

By this year's lambing season, she had 100 ewes, 30 rams and about 60 lambs, including a number of twins, with "more to come."

She tackles most of the work connected with the flock herself, but gets help with shearing and crutching. So she may always have fresh wool on hand, she employs shearers three times a year, shearing a third of the flock each time. During the lambing season, she goes round checking the ewes twice a day, or more often if necessary.

Do any white lambs ever appear among the flock? This could happen if the soil was deficient in copper, she said. But in eight years Mrs Thomas could recall breeding only one white lamb — a metaphorical "black sheep" in her flock.

She is experimenting with new breeds and colours and is delighted that some of this year's lambs show a new deep fawn colour.

The merino cross lambs generally show a white topknot. One little fellow frisking about the paddock looked enchanting with a white face, topknot and half-white long tail.

It is a rare, fascinating sight at "Gayfield" to watch 50 or more lively black lambs, ranging in age from a few days to about a month, gambolling in a paddock.

With ewes calling their lambs, and lambs bleating for their mothers, the words of the nursery rhyme, "Baa, baa, black

sheep . . ." are brought quite vividly to life.

Fleece colours vary with the seasons and Mrs Thomas says a wet season gives lighter shades. The brown tips of some of the wool results in a most attractive flecked effect when spun. The brown tip is caused by the sun, says Mrs Thomas. If she puts rugs on the sheep, the wool remains all dark.

In the woolshed at "Gayfield," fleeces are piled that range from black through many shades of grey.

Producing the same colours used to be difficult, but now Mrs Thomas has all her rams ear-tagged and mates the sheep to retain their true colours.

Ready to spin

Fleeces in the woolshed are just as they were shorn from the sheep and, apart from skirtings, are ready for spinning. The wool does not need to be washed or dyed and usually does not need carding.

To illustrate her point, Mrs Thomas pulled a handful of wool from one of the bundles in the shed and took it to her spinning wheel, where it quickly became part of a skein of eight-ply wool.

She is now selling wool not only in Tasmania and mainland Australia, but also in the United States, Canada and Holland.

Mrs Thomas has long been interested in spinning, although she does not have much time for it now and only spins wool to meet orders.

All in all, the black sheep's three bags full of wool are now in demand as never before.