

Masterclass in making Woolly hats

Debbie Hall learns how to create knitted hats with world-renowned tutor **Woolly Wormhead**

Woolly Wormhead. Now there's a name to conjure with. I'm delighted to have been introduced to this unusually titled, darned clever, international exponent of custom-knitted hats at a class held on an East Yorkshire farmstead.

I still don't know her real name, but Woolly, as myself and eight more ladies got used to addressing her at a Little Houndales Knits workshop, did enlighten us about plenty to do with creating fabulous tiffers.

At this special event (Woolly is hard to pin down – she had just been tutoring in Glasgow and dropped in for the Nafferton class before winging her way to Italy), she spent six hours teaching us the intricacies of negative ease, crown shaping formulae and balanced decreases.

Among the things I personally learned were how to knit in the round (my first attempt, and I shall never again shy away from the patterns that dictate this method); that my head is an average-for-a-female-adult 21.5in around; how to do a cable cast-on and that my cleavage isn't large enough to lose any item from my knitting kit down – unlike some of my fellow students.

Kath Foster, who runs Little Houndales Knits, had arranged for Woolly to spend the day with us crafty ladies, the aim being to teach us three basic hat styles.

Woolly wouldn't hear it from anyone that they weren't a hat person or that hats didn't suit them. "You just haven't found the one that does – yet," said Woolly, inviting us at the outset to dive into mounds of hats in all kinds of styles that she had created herself and brought along for the exercise.

It didn't take me long to find my favourite style, a Bobba hat; in the process, I had tried on types that made me look like my gran, a Flowerpot Man and a Second World War aviator.



But it just goes to show that one style doesn't suit all, and neither does one size, as Woolly was keen to point out.

And so we set out, with calculators, notepads and pencils, to work out how many stitches we needed on our circular needles to give us a hat – created in the lovely natural wool supplied by the sheep in the fields outside – designed to snugly fit our individual bonces.

I chose some of Little Houndales' yarn, made from 50 per cent Yorkshire Wolds Suffolk X and 50 per cent Alpaca, in a natural fleece shade, to start my own version of a Bobba. There were lots more gorgeous colours, too (I treated myself to some balls of rich dark purple wool to take home for a second hat project).

Woolly (the "Wormhead" bit evidently comes from a nickname she was given when she used to sport dreadlocks) was there to guide us through the process of designing



HATS AND CRAFTS: Woolly Wormhead, left, and Kath Foster at the class. Left, Kath at Little Houndales Knits. Pictures: Jerome Ellerby

our hats to our bespoke measurements.

In between times, Kath (who was knitting along with us) was in the kitchen brewing up and preparing delicious fare to see us through the day – gorgeous Danish pastries for the morning break; a lovely lunch of salads, sandwiches and nibbles and slabs of delicious homemade cake to give us another sugar boost in the afternoon.

What was nice to learn, as we chatted and giggled and worked, was that there were some real newcomers to knitting, as well as longstanding mistresses of the craft here.

One participant (who suited nigh-on every hat in the place, damn her) only picked up the needles a year ago and a very competent crafter next to me was a knitter of only two years' standing.

Woolly, on the other hand, has been knitting since she was three and used to knit a sweater every year when she was a youngster.

By the age of ten, she was starting to experiment with hand-dyeing, machine sewing and designing and making her own clothes.

It was reassuring to know that us students only needed knowledge of common increase and decrease methods, and competence with basic stitch combinations and patterns, to create some very interesting, custom-fit headgear.

My hat was well on the way by the time the workshop finished, and Woolly had given us all individual instruction in completing our own, very varied designs, from berets to slouchy styles and a fabulous little pixie number.

'Hats are the ultimate in versatile accessories. They provide warmth and protection, but also allow the wearer to express personality and individuality'



CUSTOM CREATIONS: From left, Debbie Hall, Sharon King and Vicki Bean at the workshop.

Little Houndales Knits

Kath Foster launched Little Houndales Knits at the family farm in Nafferton after a complication with her third pregnancy forced her to rethink her career.

The former dental hygienist had a lightbulb moment when her farmer husband Pete was out shearing the family flock of 60 Suffolk X sheep, bred for meat.

Kath started twisting their wool around her fingers and thought they should start to spin, and knit, the otherwise commercially unviable fleeces.

"It's amazing wool," said Kath. "It's naturally very resilient and turns away water. When it's spun, you have a beautiful fibre of exceptional quality."

The wool is spun by the Natural Fibre Company, of Cornwall.

Kath's enterprise has grown so that her shop at the farm includes beautiful handmade knitting needles, other quality yarns and knitting and crocheting patterns and accessories.

She runs a successful website and organises Wednesday knit-and-natter sessions at the King's Head pub in Nafferton (from 1pm to 3.30pm), as well as hosting a number of popular workshops at Little Houndales Farm.

Little Houndales Knits also attends Driffild Farmers' Market on the first Saturday of the month and the Humber Bridge Farmers' Market on the first Sunday of the month, from 9am to 1pm at both events.

For more information, contact Kath at Little Houndales Farm, Nafferton, Driffild YO25 4LF. Call 01377 255093; e-mail kath@littlehoundalesknits.com or visit www.littlehoundales.com

For more information about Woolly Wormhead, visit www.woollywormhead.com