



## 5. Chasing Sheep – The Big OE

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*Have handpiece; will travel*

ONCE GODFREY BOWEN HAD BEEN TO ENGLAND AND ‘STIRRED IT UP’, the way seemed to be open for Kiwi shearers to start ‘chasing sheep around the world’. Australia was commonplace; they went to Estonia as well, and the Falkland Islands, to Asia, North America, South Africa and any country where there were sheep to be shorn. Some went to instruct, some to compete, some to extend the season, and some were just wandering the world and found they could shear better than anyone else around – and earn their fare home while they were doing it. When sheep numbers started their dramatic fall from the late 1980s, shearers travelled overseas more to keep themselves employed. The lucky ones went as part of their job and did not even have to shear: Koro Mullins made several trips as a representative of a major company making shearing equipment. ‘I’ve been to the UK three times’, he said, ‘and Australia, and Europe – Spain, France – and now every young motivated shearer has actually shorn in all those places. Everywhere around the world where there are sheep you will find Kiwis there shearing them. We’ve got some good ambassadors; we’re renowned for our sheep-shearing skills.’<sup>1</sup>

It all began in the mid-1960s when the Wool Board sent Claude Waite to India to run the first shearer training programme for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. Robin Kidd had a look at what was happening there on his way to England, and then in 1970 he worked for the same programme.

It was an Aussie programme, mostly Aussie personnel running it, but they contracted us to do the shearer training. No problem, but it would have been wiser



*Gavin Mutch and his mates at Tillygreig Farm, Scotland, 2004. PIP MUTCH COLLECTION.*

in hindsight if we had taken blades – hand shears – to train them on because one of the most active regions was Kashmir and they take their sheep up to about 16,000 feet to grazing and they have to shear them up there. If they don't, there's a bidibid that grows down the mountain and as they bring them down they get covered in it. It was quite impractical taking machinery up there, but the Aussies thought they could do it. The whole programme was geared to having portable plants with petrol motors they could put on the back of a mule. The Indians could already shear with a very primitive type of blade, though, and they would have taken to our blades – we've still got some great blade shearers in this country – and they'd have been away. But the programme was already set up, and we didn't have much influence – and the Indians didn't want to be associated with hand shears either; that was ancient, primitive stuff.

Someone from here went over for about two months at a time for five or six years to continue the teaching. Their season was quite compatible with ours – it was off-season for us, so we did it on leave without pay from the Wool Board and were paid by UN. Good experience for our guys – and we did that for UN in Iran, Chile, Afghanistan, and Godfrey went to Russia, so that training's gone all over the world, all Bowen method and all Kiwi instructors.<sup>2</sup>

In 1979 and 1980 Bill Morrison went to Syria and was there for three or four months each trip. Permanent instructors had always been sent on these overseas postings, but demand was outstripping supply and provincial instructors were being asked to fill the gap. The project in Syria involved the establishment of a semi-worsted spinning mill: 'They wanted their wool in one piece instead of cut to smithereens so they couldn't spin it and had to export it to someone who could.' When Bill was asked to go, he wanted to know 'why the hell we wanted to teach Arabs to shear, and Godfrey's thoughtful reply was that this wasn't about shearing sheep, it was about selling wool, and if a New Zealand shearer went over there to teach, then that mill would buy New Zealand wool. And they did – I looked at the stats and every year for the next twelve years they bought about 300 tons of New Zealand wool.'

Bill was a bit worried about going, but reckoned he would be alright: sheep are not found in cities, after all, and he thought rural people must be much the same all over the world.

It was pretty rough in terms of danger, and the first year I had big problems trying to handle their culture, but in the seven or eight months between trips I did a lot of reading and the second time I understood much better and could put some reasoning behind some of their decisions. The way they treated their women, though – shocking in our terms – was a major one for me.



*Bill Morrison in Syria, 1980. TINA MORRISON COLLECTION.*





We had one friendly farmer who lived not far from a main road we used a lot and we used him to tell us where the military was. We taught him how to shear, we'd lend him plants to shear his own sheep, and every time I went past I would call in and have a cup of chai, green tea. One day he had a crook sheep. I didn't know what was wrong but I told the interpreter to go to a chemist and get penicillin with as many noughts behind it as he could find – the highest power penicillin. We injected the sheep and it lived, so after that he thought I was God's gift to the sheep industry. It was a time when the military was very active and it got pretty nasty with road blocks and it was easier to go around than go through. He would direct us across the desert and organise for somebody to meet us on the other side. They are Bedouin; they know everything that moves in the desert, how many tanks there are, what sort, whether it's a bad or a good unit, who they have shot lately, where their camp is. Mostly we worked with Arabs, but part of my job was to shear the ewes, most of them owned by Bedouins in the desert, so I had to venture out there. They are pretty hard men. The women milked the sheep – it was quite an experience in the middle of the desert because the sheep all line up for them and they make cheese for themselves, sell some, sell surplus sheep to the Arabs to fatten. They've got no country, but cross borders with their flocks. I don't think anyone is game to stop it because they are armed to the teeth and know the desert well.<sup>3</sup>

Kiwi shearers were well-known in Britain by the 1970s and could get a job anywhere. Ken Roberts, brought up on Churchill, a Fernie property near Wanganui, was a self-taught shearer. He had gone out with a gang and rousied and gradually got to the stage where he could shear 100, 150 – and once 200. 'In my day the big OE was to go to England and shear. Poms couldn't shear. If you could only shear 50 they thought you were a gun.' He was eighteen and had no handpiece in his baggage, but he joined up with some mates who were shearers – two Kiwis, one of them Maori, and two Australians. They had a three-stand trailer and a single plant, and Ken mostly rousied for them and sometimes got to shear. They would go from farm to farm, dealing with small mobs.

There was a contractor, Billy Kinghorn, from Wareham, in south-east England, who would advertise in New Zealand House looking for Kiwi shearers. You'd ring up and they'd ask, 'Are you a Kiwi? Right, you've got a job.' I stayed with them for about three months, then got a job on a Dorset farm as shepherd/shearer. At one part of it I had to shear 500 ewes with a dagging plant tied up with a bit of baling twine, and with an electric lead. It was slow cutting, with old narrow gear and an old handpiece. It took a week, working in the doorway of an old barn with a concrete floor and a wooden pallet as the board. We set up



*Ken Roberts shearing  
a St Kilda ewe.*  
KEN ROBERTS COLLECTION.

a few hurdles in part of this barn and we'd run in 60 or so sheep. Marion, who worked on the farm, would catch them and drag them across to me. They were a mix of breeds: Jacob sheep, black and white, with four horns – two go out the side and two go straight up – and they'd stick in your belly when you're coming down the last side. Trying to shear around the head was terrible. The cutters were very near the edge of the comb, and I was always nicking ears. It became the Ken Roberts earmark. And at the end I had to shear these *huge* rams, blackface, Jacob-Hampshire-Down cross. One I could barely hold and I had to straddle it to be able to reach the last blows and it stood up, with me sitting on its back, and walked off with about three blows left on it and a four-to-five-inch length of wool waving in the breeze. I dropped the handpiece and smashed the comb – and there's Marion in fits of laughter. She managed to turn it off and eventually we got the thing back and finished it.<sup>4</sup>



*'My new wife, Marion.  
Teaching her the Kiwi trade!'*  
KEN ROBERTS COLLECTION.

Marion was a Dorset lass, a real farm girl, and they wanted to get married and take off for New Zealand, so Ken was shearing to earn their fare home – and they are still living happily ever after at Churchill.

In the late 1970s Margaret Baynes went off on her OE with three friends, 'a brother and sister from Oparau, his mate and me, and when we arrived in London we went to New Zealand House – and here's this job for shearers. So we rang, and all of us had a job, as soon as we arrived, three shearers and a wool handler – but we had to go and make the trailer first. It was very much an experience. Then we shore in Scotland – just England and Scotland. It's the only time I shore full time in a gang, that season in the UK.'<sup>5</sup>

Mark Styles first went to England in 1981. In those days 'you couldn't just go to England', you had to have a job lined up or have patriality. 'I was alright because I had UK grandparents, but once you knew you had a job it took like three months of phone calls to the contractor in England to set it all up. You



*Harry Joyce, 75 years old;  
'a typical English shepherd'.*  
KEN ROBERTS COLLECTION.

made all your own travel arrangements, and just had to be at a certain place at a certain time and somebody would pick you up. This would be some time from mid-April on.' On that first trip Mark worked in Kent for Les Ramsden who was well-known to Kiwi shearers. He had learned to shear in New Zealand, and Bing Macdonald shore for him in 1966 when he got a trip to England as part of his prize for winning Golden Shears.<sup>6</sup> Mark enjoyed the experience, but the number of small flocks in Kent meant he did not get enough sheep to make it worthwhile financially. He went back in 1984 and then each year until 1990, and shore for Roland Ellis who did big estates, some with up to 6000 sheep, around Reading and Dorset, west into Wales, south to Brighton and east up to London. Mark was soon asked to arrive well before the season started 'to set up all the trailers for the contractor, fix everything up, do a lot of welding, repair anything that was broken from the previous season'. It would take about a month to get everything ready.



This guy had the biggest gang in England when I was working for him – all Kiwis. We were all in two-man teams, with one girl to pick up the wool, and we had a trailer that dropped on the ground, with two shearing plants on it and a catching pen and we backed up to a farmer's yard, or shed, and set up. It's a lot of work, but you could be there all day, and there might be six or eight shearers on the bigger estates. I think the most we had was fourteen on one farm – seven units with two stands each. That was a big farm with a lot of sheep and they needed them doing all in one day. They don't have a shed because they move the sheep around the estate and some are hundreds or thousands of acres – not all pasture – cropping, fallow – not set up for walking sheep around. A two-man band would shear between 300 and a thousand sheep for the day. We got to do big tallies, but the sheep were quite fast – the main breed was Mule, a cross between Scottish Blackface and Blue-faced Leicester – easy shearing, clean points, no bellies, no head wool. All the wool handlers did in the early days was roll the fleece up, pull the neck wool out and twist it into a rope then wrap it around the fleece and tuck it in to make a tight little ball and then into a bag like a big pillow slip, then it was sent away for pressing. We started towing wool presses around – a copy of the Australian one. They were steel – came like a kit-set and I welded them together and fitted them. We sold a lot – in Scotland. Each gang had a car with a trailer piled high with all the gear – press, catching pen, the lot. Same mates for most of those years, five of us Maori. Just about everyone went back the whole time I shore over there. We'd do twelve weeks in England, then move to Scotland for eight weeks, then on to Norway for September to November, shearing in the freezing works.<sup>7</sup>

Wales was a popular destination for Kiwi shearers. There had been interchange between the two countries from the time the Bowen technique was introduced to Welsh shearing, and by the 1970s a number of their young shearers were coming to New Zealand to get more experience and improve their tallies. They had taken their skills home and spread them through Britain and into Europe. Joe Paewai worked for a Welsh contractor in the early 1990s.

When I got there he was still in Italy – he kept a shearing trailer there – and when I got to his mum and dad's place there's another half-finished trailer he's building. It was three stands, made out of a caravan frame. You can't have them too wide or they won't fit through those stone-wall gates, can't have it too flimsy or it's going

*Jillian Burney shearing a Scottish Blackface ewe in the Open final at Clwyd, North Wales, July 1988. JILLS ANGUS BURNLEY COLLECTION.*

