



Judy Howarth of Nundle Woollen Mill.
PHOTOS: AMANDA DUCKER

Wool reigns supreme at Nundle

Finding a good use for some wool-processing machinery has brought new life to a country village

By Kellie Penfold

Over the years, like many country villages near large regional centres, Nundle, NSW, faced becoming a dot on the map. But a decade after this ignominious prospect loomed, an average of 300 to 400 people now visit Nundle each day. The attraction is the creation of a ball of wool – and also to buy wool and clothing by leading Australian knitwear designers.

The turnaround happened after Peter and Judy Howarth moved to Nundle from Sydney, seeking solitude. After creating an upmarket bed and breakfast, they 'did up' the local motel and a couple of shops, and then they looked for a way to get the visitors to the town, 45 minutes from Tamworth in northern NSW.

Judy says they wanted to create employment in Nundle and give people a reason to detour there: "We looked at a soap factory, candle making ... none of those appealed, and then we heard about some wool-processing machinery, which had been brought up to Tamworth from Geelong for a boutique knitting business."

The equipment translated into 25 semi-trailer loads from Geelong and required a new purpose-built factory in Nundle. The couple also had to scour the country for extra equipment before the machinery could be made operational. However, Judy says this was not a major problem, given there were once as many as 60 woollen mills in Australia.

The Nundle Woollen Mill opened in 2001, primarily to create wool and wool blends for hand-knitters. A mezzanine level was built to showcase products and give visitors a view of the machinery in action.

A website and toll-free telephone number allowed wool to be sold online and ordered from around the world.

Judy says the response from woolgrowers, as well as tourists, has been heartening: "The first reaction from woolgrowers when they enter the mill is gratitude, because they see someone is value-adding to wool in Australia and putting their fibre on display."

She says visitors love the feel and look of the balls of wool, but generally are not knitters or interested in creating their own hand-knits, so they had to seek out local knitters to make knitted items to their specification.

"Now the hand-knitted market has changed, from garments to accessories such as scarves, leg-warmers and gloves. People are seeking a finer knit, and for that reason we also stock knitted men's and women's garments from 30 Australian designers, including Sheer Bliss, Toorallie, GHG Merino Essentials, Maplebrown, Snowy River Merino, jac + jack and Carrigan. Each year, the volume of wool garments we are selling has grown by 20 per cent."

Judy says she is astounded at the interest in wool this season – considering the warm autumn. The mill got off to a particularly strong start this year with retail sales for January to March up 75 per cent on 2006.

Winning wool trousers stride out

A pair of 100 per cent wool, worsted men's trousers, developed by The Woolmark Company through a project funded by AWI, has won a prestigious US retailing award. The 'non-iron', high-performance, pure-wool trousers, which can be repeatedly machine-washed and tumble-dried, won the US publication *Retailing Today's* 2006 Product of the Year Award.

AWI funded the development of the technology needed to produce the trousers in 2005. The trousers have since been commercialised by global design and manufacturing business TAL Apparel.

Dr Allan de Boos, AWI's program manager for woven products, says the trousers fulfil consumer demands for natural fibre and easy-care clothing.

"Natural fibres are a key element in meeting the needs of modern consumers," Dr de Boos says. "They also want easy-care options for day-to-day wear."

"This has always presented a challenge for wool, but research and development has allowed the industry to meet these challenges. These woollen trousers are an example of that."

The new trousers are being marketed in the US with a number of key retailers, such as Levi, under the Dockers brand.

Dr de Boos says this sort of product innovation benefits Australia's woolgrowers by meeting the needs of modern consumers.

— REBECCA THYER



A recent open day and fashion parade, 'Celebrating Wearable Wool', attracted seven of the mill's major-label designers and 400 visitors, from throughout north-west NSW, who viewed 100 garments on the catwalk.

Judy says people are looking for quality products and customers initially balk at the 'made in China' labels. She and her staff use it as an opportunity to educate people on the value of the Chinese market for Australian woolgrowers.

Education like this has been an underlying factor in the whole enterprise. Working with the *Australian Women's Weekly*, Nundle Woollen Mill has created several garments with 'how to knit' instructions and a matching mail-order kit. In the May edition it was a shrug-type cardigan knitted with a wool and hemp blend – the latest development to come out of Nundle.

"The telephones run hot for weeks when those patterns appear," Judy says. "Every feature leads to hundreds of orders. The other aspect to education is the tours of the mills. We love school groups coming in, and if we can inspire a child to go home and talk to their parents about the need to wear wool and understand the value of it, we are getting somewhere."

"Because we sell such a range of garments, we can also demonstrate the different blends and microns. Some of the really fine jumpers are made with 17.5 micron wool, while our balls of yarn are created from 23 micron Polwarth wool from the Geelong region."

The Nundle Woollen Mill, which now employs more than 10 permanent and

casual staff, buys scoured wool and then moves it through the series of machines – the opener, carding machine, Whitin Spinning Frame, Dandy Rover and hank-reeling machine – before moving into the dye house. It is then finished on the cone winder and ball-winding machine. The opener and carding machine were built in 1914 and are kept in operational order by former mill-industry members from Geelong, who travel to Nundle to service them and help when new ideas are being trialled.

"Visitors love seeing the machinery in action. I think that is what makes us a unique tourist attraction. The men come in and watch the machinery and the women love being able to try on wool garments."

Currently, knitting yarn is made in eight and 20-ply. In addition to developing a blend with hemp, the mill has experimented with linen and angora rabbit, and dyes mohair and four-ply on site to its own colour 'recipes'. The mill also imports difficult-to-get French, Italian and Spanish fancy yarns for hand-knitters to mix with pure wool.

The Howarths believe if a woollen mill can become a tourist attraction 'out in the sticks', then the concept could be easily replicated around the country.

"If we get 300 to 400 visitors a day, what could be achieved in a major tourist area?" Judy asks.

More information: www.nundle.com, 1300 666 712