

# Hidden Lives of Testers

## Sheep Farming? Software Testing? Shear Pleasure??!

**Mark** Fewster has 20 something years' experience in the software industry, much of this specialising in testing. He held posts from software developer to development manager before moving into consultancy.

Since joining Grove Consultants in 1993, Mark has provided consultancy and training in software testing, particularly in the application of testing techniques and test automation. He is a popular speaker at national and international conferences and seminars.

Mark has served as Programme Secretary for the British Computer Society's Specialist Group in Software Testing. He was involved in the development of the original ISEB software testing qualifications and the drafting of what became the Software Component Testing Standard BS7925 and has co-authored with Dorothy Graham the book "*Software Test Automation*".

### What is your hidden life?

I'm a part-time farmer with my wife, Barbara.

### What got you interested in it?

My wife, when we first met. She was a shepherd and had a life so different from my own at the time that I was instantly attracted to it. Out of doors, caring for animals was far removed from my office-bound work caring for software products that never baa'd once (but croaked frequently!).

### Can you tell us some more about it?

Barbara is the real farmer; I'm just the part-time stockman, maintenance man and tractor driver. We live on a small farm in South West Wales of just 30 acres, but we rent another one of 30 acres a few miles away. We currently have around 50 pedigree Charollais sheep with lambs and 40 mixed breed beef cattle. The sheep are mostly sold to breeders, but those that don't make the grade are taken to market.



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Barbara takes her best sheep to a few shows, though she spends more time preparing and showing sheep for other people because she is an expert at it (Barbara was featured on a farming programme on the television a couple of years ago). I have helped out with the showing but I prefer to help behind the scenes when I can. Besides, our son Rhys is beginning to shine in this area. He is a natural in the show ring.

I am never short of a job to do around the farm. In fact, I am spoilt for choice as it is often a case of prioritising an ever-growing list. Whether it is repairing fences or the barn roof, mucking out the cows or carting silage bales, there is always something to suit your mood and to enjoy. Some jobs require ingenuity while others require no thought at all. The latter provide great opportunities to think. I have had an occasional flash of inspiration whilst knee deep in ... well, er ... you know!

**How often do you find time for farming?**

Not as often as I would like. It depends on my work commitments. When I am at home I may be called upon to help out at any time but that is mostly to do feeding while Barbara is away showing. I would like to be able to spend more of my time at weekends working on the farm but often my real job encroaches on this time.

**How does testing relate to farming?**

Three ways spring to mind. The first concerns the quality of testing. In farming there are many tests carried out, not least by the veterinary services and government agencies. I often wonder about the quality of some of these tests in the same way that I am concerned about the quality of testing carried out on software in some organisations. Recently, a vet carried out a test for tuberculosis (TB) in our cattle, as required by the government. The vet declared one cow to be infected with TB. This has had serious implications, not least being considerable expense for us. Further tests carried out in laboratories



have now confirmed that no TB was present in the cow, so the vet's reading of the test results was wrong.

We often hear that something has been 'tested' and the implication is that it must be OK and is safe to use. This is not necessarily the case. More of us need to ask, "How well has it been tested?"

The second parallel between software testing and farming is related to resources. As in testing, there are times on the farm when we do not have sufficient resources, particularly with a small farm such as ours.

We have to plan to make the best use of the resources we do have.

The third parallel brings us back to one of my favourite topics: automation. Many farming tasks are tool-supported but not automatic. We have some tools (tractor, digger, baler, quad bike and the like) that can be fun to use, make some tasks much more efficient but if not used properly can really mess things up, too!

**Would you consider it as a career, and why?**

Certainly not! It is lovely to live on the farm with the space to wander and ponder, but I like to have problems to solve and working with software brings many such opportunities and frequently. Farming has its problems, of course, but some of the work is more of a physical challenge than a mental one. At least with software testing the work that isn't challenging can probably be automated, but then, to automate is itself a real challenge! ■

**Photographs - Top to Bottom**

Photo 1: Mark with his wife, Barbara and his son Rhys a couple of years ago.

Photo 2: The farm.

Photo 3: A much younger Rhys wins a prize.