The key words for Lincoln Longwool fiber are lustrous, strong, and long. Lincoln Longwool sheep, or Lincolns, are large sheep that grow copious amounts of strong wool. One of the English luster longwool breeds, Lincolns developed in the county of Lincoln, located in east-central England. There was a time when they were the largest sheep in the British Isles and possibly the world. Although today individual animals from other breeds may exceed their size, Lincolns can still be right up there in the record books, with rams weighing 200 to 350 pounds and ewes 175 to 250 pounds. Along with their mass, they have docile—yet intelligent and even mischievous—personalities. In early times, they were reputed to be able to walk long distances from farm to market without losing much weight on the journey. They’re sturdy, just like their wool.

Lincoln wool has for centuries set an international standard for fleece weight, fiber length, and gleaming brilliance. The Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) in the British Isles notes a single young ram’s fleece that weighed 46 pounds, although more typical weights are between 11 and 16 pounds. Potential staple lengths are remarkable, and again the RBST mentions a young ewe who grew a fleece more than 30 inches long, although the annual length of fiber is more often between 7 and 15 inches. Lincolns are frequently shorn twice a year to yield more manageable spinning lengths of between 3½ and 5 inches. What you can do with a Lincoln fleece depends on the staple lengths of the shearing you have.

As with many of the older breeds of sheep, the Lincoln’s origins can’t be traced with certainty.
the first century C.E., the Romans are thought to have brought white-wooled sheep with at least two different types of fleeces into the British Isles. Localized strains developed, including something called the Midland Longwool, from which the Lincoln Longwool and its close relative the Leicester Longwool are believed to have developed. Wool was the original Lincoln’s most valuable economic contribution, although by the eighteenth century, meat was becoming increasingly important. Lincolns, because of their slow maturation, could not compete as well when food eclipsed fiber. Robert Bakewell (1725–1795) used local longwool sheep, including Lincolns, when he began his experiments with selective breeding of livestock. He intended to increase the meat value. His genetic practices influenced the breed’s evolution, resulting in sheep that matured somewhat more quickly. The changes brought about by his selections are said to have had negative effects on wool quality, although Lincoln wool remains a splendid resource.

While there isn’t space here to discuss the global travels of the Lincoln, and I’m not aware that anyone has yet fully traced them, here are a few examples of the ways in which they have influenced the world’s wool supplies. Shortly after the Revolutionary War, old-type Lincolns were imported into the United States. The Bakewell-influenced style was brought into Massachusetts in 1825. Lincolns were crossed with other sheep, either finewool breeds or local types, to produce additional breeds on many continents. New Zealand’s Corriedale carries half Merino and half Lincoln genes. Australia’s Polwarth is three-quarters Merino and one-quarter Lincoln. In North America, the Columbia came about through crossing Lincoln rams and Rambouillet ewes, while the Panama (later eclipsed by the Columbia) resulted from the opposite combination, Rambouillet rams and Lincoln ewes. The Targhee came into being by breeding Rambouillet rams with Corriedale and Lincoln/Rambouillet ewes. At least two Russian longwool types, the Liski and the Kalinin, incorporated Lincoln blood.

With this widespread and significant impact on the general population of sheep over a number of centuries, it seems odd that the Lincoln is listed as an endangered breed by both the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC) in North America (Watch category) and the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (At Risk category). Why? Lincolns are slow growing, and they don’t have high percentages of multiple births, so they aren’t the most economically appealing of meat breeds. In addition, their wool, which has many delightful qualities, does not fit the industrial processing model.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF LINCOLN WOOL**

Lincoln wool is of the sleek, shiny variety and can be very long. Some people unfamiliar with the longwools are tempted to call it hairy, although that characterization seems inappropriate because it is supple and not at all stiff. A Lincoln fleece consists of a single type of wool fiber, without the components of kemp or hair or soft undercoat found in some other breeds. While Lincoln lambswool can be relatively fine and flexible, the adult fiber is strong and stable and suitable for use in textiles where durability is more desirable than softness. Because the
The locks are dense, heavy, and firm. The tips of the locks are pointed and often spiraled. Their crimp is well defined, broad, and regular in both fibers and staples, and there aren’t many crimp waves to an inch. It’s easy to see and count the crimp cycles in a sample of Lincoln. The shine of Lincoln comes from the large, broad scales that cover the surface of every fiber and allow it to reflect light.

An ounce of Lincoln longwool can be tucked into a smaller bag than is needed for an ounce of, say, Merino or Suffolk. The fiber is relatively low in grease, and fleeces are easy to wash. Lincoln fiber is also stable (a more useful word than inelastic), and textiles made from densely spun yarns and constructed in a way that closes the spaces between those yarns will be substantial and firm. Fabrics will drape well if they have been constructed with enough room for the yarns to move around.

COLORS, NATURAL AND DYED

Historically, Lincolns have produced their quantities of wool in white, the most useful color for bulk marketing. Most of the wool currently grown by the breed is white, and it’s an exquisite clear color that can be almost mesmerizing in its brilliance. Yet the breed’s genetics include some creamy shades along with a full range of silvery grays, from light through dark, all the way to black. In most breeds (and in most Lincolns), blacks fade with age to gray tones, although in conversation with Christiane Payton at North Valley Farm in Oregon, I learned that Lincolns have an uncommon genetic combination that produces nonfading blacks. The colored sheep often produce an array of related colors on different parts of their bodies—not spots, but shadings. Careful sorting can give the spinner a range of tonalities. I’ve heard that there are moorit (brown) Lincolns, although I have yet to see any fiber from one. Some of the grays I’ve sorted have been warmer (or slightly browner) than others, although most are on the cool side of the gray spectrum.

Lincoln wool takes dyes, both natural and chemical, extremely well. Because of the luster, the colors display with a luminous quality. The natural colors can be so seductive that it’s difficult to think of shifting them through dyeing; the only cure for this is to have enough Lincoln that some can be immersed in a dyepot and turned into shimmering rainbows. Of course, the whites dye beautifully, but the natural grays give richness to the tones produced by overdyeing.

USING LINCOLN WOOL

So we have this long, strong, shiny fiber with defined but low-frequency crimp. It isn’t bouncy or soft. It’s very much not like Merino, the breed-specific wool that many contemporary textile folks have experienced. It’s also not like Bluefaced Leicester, the other breed-specific fiber that’s been prevalent recently. Even though Bluefaced Leicester is another of the British longwools, its character doesn’t resemble that of Lincoln, which is significantly stronger, more openly crimped, more lustrous, and usually longer.

Lincoln’s durability makes it well suited for textiles that need to stand up to wear, such as rugs, bags, pillows, and outerwear. It’s also an exceptional choice for artwork. Stanley Bulbach, a New York-based textile artist, weaves tapestries in which his imagery connects the ancient and modern worlds. Lincoln, in both natural and dyed colors, has for years been his fiber of choice. Very little commercially spun Lincoln is available for handwork, so he obtains fleeces and produces his own palette of yarns. Lincoln can be spun into strong warp yarns and provides wefts that may be challenging to beat into position but will show designs crisply.

Lincoln is one of the fibers that can be used to make dolls’ wigs, and the locks can be used unspun to form the pile on woven fleece rugs. It is also at home in flatwoven rugs, soumak, and other techniques. Spun evenly and with firm twist, it’s strong enough for warp-faced weavings, including card weaving. It felts, although not rapidly; you’ll have to work at it.
In knitted or crocheted laces or texture patterns, the tendency of the fibers to straighten out, instead of calmly relaxing into sinuous curves like more malleable wools, opens the spaces between the stitches in ways that can be either frustrating or fascinating to work with. The right gauge will permit the necessary contrast between background areas and the yarnovers or contrasting stitch types that make the pattern visible. At a gauge that doesn’t work well (generally one that is too loose), the patterning will vanish, and the result will look like an irregular mesh rather than a lace, or like knit/purl patterning that is fighting to be seen. However, if you play around to find the right combination of twist levels, yarn weights, and gauge, you can get delightful results with any technique that you want to use.

In 2009, shepherd Louise Fairburn of Lincolnshire was married in a flowing dress made from wool grown by her Lincoln flock. The groom, Ian Fairburn, wore a Lincoln vest. The two garments show two dramatically different applications of this distinctive wool (see resources).

**SPINNING LINCOLN**

How you handle your Lincoln will, for the most part, depend on how long it is. I prefer my Lincoln fibers to be between 4 and 6 inches long, although sometimes I take what I can get! Other lengths, shorter or longer, require alternative approaches and push my creativity. For whatever preparation technique you decide on, you will probably want to tease open the tips of the locks, which may be stuck together, and perhaps also their bases, which may be lightly matted.

You can make a very smooth, slick yarn or one that is wildly textured. The smoother the yarn, the more luster will be evident. Yet Lincoln has enough shine to glisten even when the fiber goes in all directions.

You can lightly open the locks and spin directly from them, you can pick them to open them more and spin from the resulting clouds, or you can flick them, keeping the basic lock structure intact but opening up the full length. You can hand- or drumcard the wool as well, especially if it was shorn when it was not very long; it may be a little easier to handle on a drumcarder, unless you’re proficient with handcards. With all of these techniques, you can spin a textured yarn in which the fibers have enough body and strength not to fall apart or lose their jazz in use. At my favorite length, the fiber is especially well suited to being processed on my peasant combs.

With long Lincoln staples, you can make a low-twist, bulky yarn suited for knitting, crocheting, and other techniques that don’t require the strands to be worked under tension, including for weft in weavings. For use in warps or for maximum durability, or if your fibers are on the short side, you’ll need to add more twist.

The slick fibers will want to slide apart when you are spinning—or in a low-twist yarn that’s put under tension. As you spin, the wool will slightly resist being twisted, wanting to untwist and slide apart between your hands. If you have especially long fibers, you don’t need a lot of twist to make a yarn of integrity, yet additional twist will give you a beautiful solid yarn. Practice holding the fibers very lightly and be sure you have enough twist to get the yarn off the bobbin as well as onto it. If you have especially long fibers, you will need to pay attention when you are processing them, ensuring that your combing or carding involves long strokes to clear the entire span of the fibers. When spinning, you’ll need to keep your hands far enough apart that you can draft effectively.

When you are using Lincoln yarn, don’t try to break it without first untwisting to release the ends of the joined fibers. Because of their length and strength, you’ll be likely to hurt your hands instead of snapping the strand.

**LINCOLN LEASH**

The beautiful grays and blacks and clear whites of the Lincoln samples I had, along with the fiber’s enormous strength and luster, made me think of our lovely black-and-white rescue border collie, Ceilidh. I imagined making a leash for her that would stand up to lots of wear and feel smooth in my hand. I thought of a variety of construction techniques and ultimately settled on the simplest: a plain-weave inkle band.
At the hardware store, I found nickel-plated round-eye snap hooks and selected the half-inch size as most appropriate for my 40-pound dog. I wanted the leash to be between ¾ inch and 1 inch wide, and I wanted it to fill the eye portion of the hook.

I spun a light gray yarn for the dominant color, and a little bright white for an accent. For the dark grays, I roughly sorted bits from a single fleece into medium gray and dark portions and spun them separately. I spun as much as I had of each color, preparing the fiber on my two-row St. Blaise peasant combs, pulling the fibers off using a knitting-needle gauge as a diz, and spinning generally (but not rigidly) worsted-style. Typically, I pay attention to the lengths of fiber I draft and the number of treadle strokes for each length, but I spin by visual and not mathematical references. The final yarns measured about 25 wraps per inch.

The biggest challenge in making a leash for a young, active dog is securing the ends: the loop portion and the hardware attachment. Lincoln is difficult to knot effectively. Some knots slip out, while others hold more securely. For example, a standard square knot will tend to work loose, while an overhand knot with lengthy tails will stay in place reasonably well.

Because I didn’t trust knots at the ends of the warp, I knotted tightly, did not trim the ends close to the knots, and made sure each end of the leash was at least triple-joined. After knotting the warp ends together in small groups, I handstitched over and through the yarns at each end. Then I handstitched the band-to-band join that either formed the handle loop or attached the leash to the snap hook.

On the loop end, the stitching covers about an inch of the doubled band. Then I braided some of the extra length of warp, after passing it around the sides of the band to the other side, and secured the ends of the braid. The result of this braided section is mostly decorative but does give one extra level of security to the join.

On the hook end, I stitched similarly through the doubled layers, then folded the band in half with the cut end inside, stitched thoroughly through all layers, tightly double-wrapped the join with yarn, and then secured the ends by running them through the middle of the wrapped section several times.

Deborah Robson, former editor of Spin-Off magazine and coauthor with Carol Ekarius of The Fleece and Fiber Sourcebook: More Than 200 Fibers from Animal to Spun Yarn (Storey, 2011), continues her explorations and study and writing about spinning and wool. She also teaches occasionally. More information can be found on her website, www.drobson.info, and in her blog, http://independentstitch.typepad.com.

Deb spun a smooth, strong Lincoln yarn at 25 wraps per inch and warped her inkle loom to make a leash for her active border collie, Ceilidh, but it is Spin-Off’s photographer Joe Coca’s dog Katie modeling the leash.

Deb's dog model for the leash.