Interview with Linda (pseudonym) – pet pig keeper

7th July 2022, online.

Researcher = [K]

K: Hello!

[pig appears on screen grunting]

P: this is [Mindy].

K: Hi [Mindy], is she the only pig you have?

P: Yeah just the one, my husband’s heart couldn’t take two I don’t think.

K: What made you decide to have a pet pig?

P: I’ve always liked pigs and you know, when people started to put out there that there was mini pigs that kind of pricked my interest, this was many years ago to be fair. Then it kinda stuck with me, then you find out they don’t really exist, there are small pigs but not the kind you can fit in your handbag like you’d like to think. I don’t think it ever went away, [My husband] and I had a dog and it passed away, I said “that’s it we’re not having a dog again”. [My husband] and my daughter were winging about getting a dog and then I managed to convince myself and everybody else that getting a pig, you can walk it but you don’t have to walk it. So it was like perfect, wouldn’t be half as much trouble or half as much commitment. I started to follow a guy who had a smallholding in London for 4 or 5 years. My husband tried to fob me off, you know you can like adopt a pig. Then the guy put on Facebook said that he wasn’t going to do anymore pigs because of his health and I was like, but I know this guy, the size of his pigs and how big they’re going to grow. I think this was on the Thursday and we went to London on the Friday and got her [laughs]. So, I always wanted one and was always ready for like [My husband] to give in and say yes, but I think had that guy not packed it in I probably wouldn’t have jumped so quick. It was always there, but it was the perfect opportunity.

K: And what was the thing about pigs in particular that attracted you?

P: I don’t know, I genuinely don’t know, just always found them really cute and really sweet. I couldn’t, you know, maybe it’s that they’re just an affectionate animal that maybe in my head shouldn’t have been. Like no one thinks about going and rubbing a cow’s belly, because it’s a farm animal. But, you know, pigs are quite affectionate and stuff... and I do tend to do things a bit different sometimes, so.... I did kind of have this vision of me walking her to the pub, ya know, it would be great to take her down the pub and everything but unfortunately in this country we don’t have separate rules for domestic pigs, they’ve got to follow the food chain pig rules. But yeah, I just really like them. The noises they make and how affectionate and clever they are.

K: So what was the process of actually getting her and taking her home?

P: We drove to London on the Friday and went the following morning to this guy's smallholding. We got out of the car and saw these piglets and I just burst into tears. I was so happy. This guy was like “no, no don’t look at those piglets until you’ve looked at their parents because that’s not what you are going to get”. He was quite realistic, and I just... I could have come home with them all, I just loved it. I think the hardest decision was picking whether we wanted a boy or girl, the only way we settled that was there was some reading out there that suggested girls could be slightly smaller than boys. Which, having known what I know now, I would have either had her lady bits sorted out or got a month because that once a month is hell. So, yeah we fed them and watched them for a while and picked one. He then vaccinated her. Then we put her in a cat carrier and I sat in the back of the car with her all the way from London, just in love.

K: So what made you pick [Mindy] out?

P: I don’t know, there were black and white ones like her and plain black. I think I settled on black and white. I don’t think she was doing anything, it was just how cute she was. She probably was a bit less interested in the food and more interested in us, which is ironic because this pig lives and breathes for food, she’d trample anybody so, that’s weird that that’s changed. But it was more how she looked. I didn’t really look at markings and things... she probably hasn’t got the bonniest patches if you were gonna be all daft about it.

K: What kind of breeds of pig is she bred from?

P: He said she was a German mini pig crossed with a pot belly pig so probably a bit of all sorts in there to be fair. And a little bit of Kune Kune maybe? So, a bit of everything.

K: How long ago was that?

P: We got her two years ago, she will be three in June. We had her 3 years in the September. So we’ve had her coming up to 2 and a half years.

K: I guess you didn’t have much time to prepare for her?

P: Well, in my head I'd already planned like ‘when we get a pig it can have this and that..’ I'd spent loads of time over the years reading about pigs and literally on the Saturday just went and got everything we need it, like the puppy pads and... she was sleeping in a small dog bed. We didn’t need that much straight away, when they’re little they aren’t much of a problem. We didn’t need baby gates and stuff like that, you just picked her up or whatever. She wasn’t that much of an issue at all. When she got a bit bigger I built her a pen outside so she could go out. She was small enough to have her own room in the house for a while when we went out, but then we got the pen. She didn’t need loads of stuff straight away though. Erm, he sent us home with some food and advice for the first few days.

K: what kind of advice?

P: Er, don’t feed her too much because she will get bigger the more you feed her. He gave us, well I messaged him a few times afterwards, told us not to feed her too much, things that I probably already knew like... they like to stand in water... stuff like that. Talked to us a little about training. It was pretty basic. It was more about the hooves and you need to trim them every year... nothing too dramatic. He gave us the basics.

K: Did you come across any challenges in caring for her?

P: No. First couple of nights, in fact I slept out with her the first night because she cried loads so, but it was the first time she’d been away from her brothers or sisters so it was to be expected really. So, I literally slept with her the first night and after that we were fine. She is brilliant too at night now.

K: How have you adjusted to life with [Mindy]?

P: Our life has been snipped, like what we can do and where we can go... it’s had a massive impact on that because... so, there’s another girl who has a minipig near us, she got hers and her pig has had a completely different experience to my pig. She finds it easier to get someone to come let him out if she needs to go away or whatever, whereas I knew about the company thing, it’s better to have two but they get along with like dogs and cats and this and that, so we have got a cat and I stupidly expected that the cat would want to be friends with the pig. She didn’t and she still doesn’t, she’s just not interested at all. So, she needed a lot of entertainment whereas if she had a companion, she wouldn’t have needed that much entertainment, and because they are so clever, if I asked someone to come in, let her out, and feed her, that wouldn’t work. She is too clever. She’s too tuned in. If it’s someone she doesn’t know she will push the boundaries and is very vocal. If you ask her to do something she doesn’t want to do she will bark back at you, so if it was someone, she didn’t know they’d think she was gonna eat them! I have one friend who will come but because my daughter lives here it’s okay, unless we all want to go away together, then it is horrific. She’s done two nights with her, our friend, but that’s it. We’re going away for a whole week in August, but it is really tying. She’s in when we are in and out when we’re out. I feel it’s bad, she’s been out all day. I haven’t got a pet just to leave her outside all day, so it is very tying.

K: What does her outside space look like?

P: She’s got a rectangular run with a little pig house that matches our shed. Then, along the back she has like bark wood chippings for maybe two thirds of it, then there is a meter long strip of flagstones then a meter long strip of fake grass. We did have some concrete because it would wear her hooves down. Because she was spending too much time on it her feet were getting a bit sore so we got the role of fake grass and there is just enough concrete to keep her feet trim, but not get sore. Then she has a poo corner and lots of things to keep her busy, like she’s got a tie filled with balls to put food in, bottles she has to nudge to get food out, we’ve got two horse feeding balls that we put carrots in, anything to try and make the food last more than ten minutes and keep her busy through the day. Inside, she’s got some twinkly lights, a big sofa cushions in there to keep her warm and a sign on the door that says “happy as a pig in shit”. Then in the summer, we have a shade that goes up and covers pretty much half of the run. She doesn’t like water she won’t go in her paddling pool to cool down or anything. There’s a couple of chains too that we dip in peanut butter and she chews them.

K: Is it difficult to keep her entertained?

P: Yes. The problem is when you go to work, I have to put out everything at once. We have a camera in the garden and if I went to work and looked at it at 8am, she’s found it all and done it. So, in an ideal world she’d have some of it in the morning then some later on but it’s just not possible. She finds it all then have a sleep, then mooch around and see if she’s missed anything. We live near a main road but there are people walking by so there is always noise for her, it’s not quiet and dull. Then we might walk her, less about exercise and more about enrichment really.

K: Where does she sleep?

P: She has her own bed in the conservatory.

K: How would you describe your relationship with her?

P: I'm in love with her. My princess. She’s spoilt. When we first got her we said, you know, pecking order... if you don’t do something about it she be the one... yeah, so we did all the movement with the pig stuff, erm so I'm definitely the one who has most joy with getting her to do stuff. Absolutely love her to death, snuggle her and kiss her on the nose and rub her oil into her and [laughs], absolutely love her to death. Yeah, I absolutely love her.

K: How do you think she perceives her relationship with you?

P: Er, I think she probably, I'm probably the most important person to her, but she still challenges me when it comes to food. If there was, I mean if she got into a carrier bag or I dropped food and she got it, she wouldn’t give it to me. She’s extremely clever, really well trained and chooses when she does it. She’s so clever. But yeah, if it’s raining and you tell her to go for a wee, she will go but she will grunt. I think that makes me love her more those little grunts. Had a couple of physical challenges with her when she’s snapped at somebody and I've picked her up and thrown her in a bedroom. But she knows if you’re not really into her.

K: How does she show that?

P: Erm, my daughters’ other half doesn’t like her too much and if he’s doing the dishwasher, she knows it will piss him off to go and try and eat out of it. She won’t go in the kitchen when he’s in there because she knows he won’t give her anything, she’s not daft.

K: How would you describe pigs to others?  
  
P: Like really smart dogs. I would say she is on par with a dog in her intelligence and she is on par with a 2-year-old child, in the amount of effort she takes. You wouldn’t leave a 2-year-old in a room and go upstairs, you wouldn’t leave her unless it’s been pig proofed. Like, we’ve got child locks on all the cupboard doors and blah blah blah. It’s like having a toddler, you turn around for two minutes and she is up to no good. She’s only being a pig, she’s doing what pigs do, she’s not being bad.

K: do you think having a pet pig has changed your perception of pigs at all?

P: Yeah. they are cleverer than I thought they were. Cleverer than I gave her credit for. She, having known then what I know now, I would have probably, if anyone was thinking about doing it now you’d either need to know they will get on with other animals you’ve got or get two of them. We spend so much more time entertaining her than we would if she had a companion. I think I was a bit naïve that she was going to get on with the cat.

K: How does your relationship with your other pets compare to your relationship with your pig?

P: Much less, our cat is a bit antisocial, he doesn’t interact as much. [Mindy] is much more affectionate.

K: You had a dog too?  
  
P: Lost the dog before [Mindy], but I'd say it’s on a par with how I feel about having a dog. It’s the same. The only thing she’s not as good as the dogs is if you’re not feeling good, she doesn’t care as long as there is food involved. They’ve got a bit more fine-tuning and can pick up on your emotions, pigs don’t have that. So, I think it is similar to the love you have for a dog.

K: Has she had any health problems at all?

P: No, we have been to the vets twice once for vaccinations. There was one time I thought she was gonna die. Turns out we had just given her too much bread and she had a horrific tummy ache and was bloated. But that was quite traumatic. She had the shits when she broke in to the cupboard.

K: And what do you know about biosecurity?

P: What does that mean?

K: So, practices and things to help minimize risk of disease.

P: I suppose you mean like how we have to behave? I know we had a visit for the walking license. We choose a route and walk it with someone, can’t go anywhere to near to a pub or a shop or a farm with certain animals because of risk of infection. We get one route agreed that we stick to. There are very few places you can go. Then, the preparation of the food we do in a separate place, she’s got her own chopping boards and knives and stuff. And we don’t give her scraps and things, although I know she’s never gonna end up in the food chain. I don’t know if there is enough to warrant it, but I personally feel that there should be slight differences in keeping a pet pig and a farm pig, but I suppose they can’t guarantee it won’t end up in the food chain. So, I get it but I do get jealous when I see people in America like walking them anywhere and stuff. But, like she stands there between your legs when you’re cooking meat and stuff. You know she’d eat anything.

K: Do you eat pork at all in the house?

P: Yeah [laughs]. She would eat it. We make little jokes like if she’s being naughty, we’ll say “pack it in or you’ll be a pork pie”. If I thought for a minute, she knew what I was saying then I wouldn’t say it. I have been a vegetarian at a point in my life and I don’t eat much meat now, I would say I'm 90% veggie. There’s only a bit of meat I eat. My attitude to it is that meat has always been a part of life. If I could guarantee that animals were in the food chain and kept the right way and culled in the right way. I have an issue with the way they are kept to make more money out of them but I don’t have an issue with eating meat, I think that’s been around a lot longer... it’s just a way of life. I don’t eat much of it myself, I choose not to. It’s just the conditions it’s done under I don’t like.

K: And what conditions for pigs do you have an issue with?

P: Cramped. They don’t get to be more than a few months old then they’re transferred in those horrible big wagons, and like images of them being killed hung upside down and stuff, it’s just horrible. Like, they’re fed and stuff to get what they need in the easiest and cheapest way which isn’t, I see the pigs at pigs in the woods who are just living life and that’s wonderful, but it’s not much of a life if you’re just being fed what’s needed, then it’s straight off to be dealt with.

K: How have your friends and family reacted to you having a pet pig?

P: Think I'm mad. An idiot. She’s a bit of a celebrity in the village, when we go out walking everyone is interested. People I don’t even know walk past and go “hiya [Mindy]!’. So, some people have seen her a few times. We went out on Sunday and three people asked if they could take photos. We’ve had people knocking on the door!

K: Does having her as a pet make you question your food choices at all?

P: No, but I'm not an average person. So, I think it’s because I have ADHD and I'm able to separate the two. As an ADHD person, what’s happening here and now is what’s happening here and now, everything else I aint got a clue about. So, for instance, my daughter remembered she saw a load of pigs to be slaughtered in a wagon and it really upset her, she couldn’t eat sausages or anything. So, in a situation like that, when it’s proper in my face then yeah, it would have an effect. But in my own personal space, I'm easily able to separate the two things.

K: Have you ever had conversations with other people who have met [Mindy] and they have discussed meat?

P: No, I remember going to a sanctuary and the first time I went to visit, the volunteer who took us round said “i guarantee by the time you’ve met them all, you will want to be vegetarian”. She was very, sort of... “don’t eat meat, don’t eat meat, don’t eat meat”. I found that quite, it made me a little uncomfortable because, well maybe it should have done, maybe it was right to make me think can you love an animal but still eat it? I think maybe I'm just a little bit different, most would struggle to love something this much... I remember going to France and they gave me a horse meat steak and that’s what made me veggie, because I had a pony at home. I said I'd never touch meat again. I did eventually. But yeah, I think it would make more people than not question it. I think it’s just because I'm a little bit special and can separate the two. The more I'm thinking about it, it wouldn’t be the norm at all. I don’t eat much meat but one of the meats I do eat is occasionally I have really crispy bacon, and yeah, it’s bad. But I can separate the two and it’s a bit abnormal thinking about it. There were a couple of people who thought we had got her to eat her.

K: How did that make you feel when they assumed that?

P: Probably wasn’t too offended because that is what pigs are there for. If you’re a pig farmer, you only keep pigs to sell pigs for eating. You don’t get anything else out of a pig on a farm other than meat. So, I don’t think it offended me massively because that is a normal assumption to make, it’s not normal to get a pet pig. When they make jokes about pork and things, I say I threaten her with making her a pork pie. But what we’re doing is not the norm and what they’re thinking is the norm. Whether that is right or wrong, it is the norm that pigs are bred to be eaten.

K: What’s your favourite thing about pigs?  
  
P: Personality, she’s just got so many sides to her personality, so many emotions, so she’s loving, and she’ll cuddle but you ask her to do something she don’t wanna do she will bark and get in your face. If you ignore her she will have a strop.