Interview with Beth (pseudonym) pet pig keeper.

1st July 2022, online.

Researcher = [K]

K: Why did you decide to have a pet pig?

P: Well it was something that ever since I was like 15 I always wanted a pig, but obviously I went to university and had to wait for the right time and have the right resources to keep one. Then it just came up on Facebook to rehome a female pet pig, someone in my local town, their situation changed so they had to rehome her. We went to view her, and I just fell in love, we got all the paperwork sorted out because you have to have the CPH I think you call it? We got all that sorted but the rehoming fell through because I didn’t realise female pet pigs come into season every three weeks and they get really quite hormonal, and because I've got dogs I didn’t want to chance that conflict potentially every 3 weeks. So, anyway they found another home for her. I just happened to message a breeder about it and they said to me, we find that once the boys have been neutered or castrated they tend to be better pets for inside the house. They had 1 boy left, so I went to see him and I just fell in love and said ‘i want to bring him home’ and he was like, covered in bitemarks from his siblings and mite marks, he had previously had mites but he was recovering. I just had to take him home

K: And what sparked the interest in pigs in particular?

P: I don’t know, I just always loved them. Always been my favourite animal and then I said if I ever get land, I would like to get more. Can’t have them all in the house. My mum loved pigs and she would have had one if she could. Then I moved out and found myself in a position where I could have one.

K: What’s your pigs name?

P: [Randall].

K: Sweet. Do you know what breed he is?

P: They just call them minipigs, on his paperwork it’s just mini pig because they’ve selective bred him with all different breeds. The breeder we got him from, that’s their like niche. They breed them not only for their size but also the temperament as well. To be fair he looks more like a boar.

K: Is this a local breeder you went to?

P: Yeah about 20 minutes away.

K: How old is he?

P: He’ll be one in September. We had him at 12 weeks not 8 weeks.

K: What did you do to prepare for his arrival?

P: We kinda went and saw him and didn’t expect to bring him back so we weren’t prepared in that sense. But we had done some preparation because we thought we were gonna rehome the other pig but it was mainly with the dogs, because you can’t leave them together. So the dogs are set up in another room now and [Randall] is in the kitchen diner at night. Then, my mum is a dog groomer, and she came with us and brought a cage just in case we brought him home. Only when he was small he was in the cage at night but we never locked it, the door was open. Then a cage for him to travel in aswell. The pig food we got on the way home, the pet shop that the breeder used were on the way home. The licenses, we sorted all that out before because you can’t transport a pig without having licenses. Ear tag was all done, they had done that. He was already castrated, we only had like a couple mats. It were winter and he had no hair so we used the dogs coats from the previous year. It was all like hand-me-downs. Even the harnesses, now he’s too big and he has his own. So, quite an easy transition.

K: What did you know about caring for pigs before you got [Randall]?

P: so, I'd done my research but sort of picked up information ever since I was like 15 and still wanted one. I used to research information when I was younger to try and like persuade my mum. She said we’d have to wait till we moved. I think the biggest thing is you have to have a like walking map, you can’t just put them in your car and go down to the beach, unless you live near a beach. So, sort of you need a walking license to see where you can go. You need to know if you’re going on holiday who can have hi, we’re lucky we have reliable people that would come to the house. But yeah, sort of around the legal side rather than physical side.

K: What there anything in particular you found difficult to understand or navigate through?

P: Not so much to understand, it’s quite black and white but it is difficult in the sense that he is a house pig and not in like a herd, he’s not with other pigs so the restrictions are very tight. You can’t walk him down the shops with you because it’s near food, you can’t let him eat from the kitchen because of contamination even though he’s not with other pigs. So, it’s them kind of small inconveniences. My bins are now in my cupboards and they’re child-locked because he would just grab everything out. Chairs, wooden chairs are fine but we had material chairs and he ripped right through them, so they have to be in the garage or on the table. Other than that, that’s it really. We heard a few horror stories were people have had their houses destroyed but we have been quite fortunate really and that hasn’t been the case. The dogs cause more damage.

K: Had you met many pigs before you got [Randall]?

P: Not house pigs other than that one we were going to rehome.

K: So you’d never met a pig in person?

P: Not in the house, but I had on farms and stuff. I think what persuaded me was the pigs actually lived in a downstairs flat, and it was kept in a cage when they went to work. That’s no life for a pig, first of all. But, if they managed in that situation, I should be able to do it in a bigger house with a garden, I think that what swayed me. I saw those in a small flat and they managed it, we should be able to do it with a garden, walks and a bigger house.

K: How have you adapted your house and garden for [Randall]?

P: Like I say, bins are in the cupboard, cupboards are locked. Can’t have chairs. Can’t have anything really freestanding. My garden is now a tip. We thought we’d put a boundary fence in, that worked for the first few weeks but he extended it. He’s dug all the grass up now but it is what it is. When the summer comes, we’re gonna get decking then whatever is left we will have it properly fenced off. He can have it. He has got a kennel too because in the summer he likes to be outside. He will go in the kennel sometimes to get out of the sun.

K: Where does he sleep?

P: He sleeps downstairs in the kitchen diner. We had all these material beds, I don’t know if he destroyed them or the dogs did. We got like the big plastic beds with loads of throws and pillows because he keeps nicking the pillows off the sofa.

K: Has having [Randall] changed your perception of pigs?

P: Massively. I knew they were intelligent, I didn’t quite realise how sociable they are. If he sees people down the street he will run after them to go say hello. He loves kids, he will bolt for a pram or a child. I knew they were clever but I didn’t realise how clever. Even in terms of like, speaking with him, I can say “[Randall], are you in or are you out?” and he will come in or stay out. That sort of... how I would speak to a person, he can understand, if I say it’s bedtime he will go straight to bed. With a dog, it’s more like hard. I speak to him like you would a person.

K: Has your communication built up with him over time?

P: Definitely, I think the reason we’ve been successful with him in the house is because we have been strict with him. Not cruel or nasty, it’s not a dog, it’s a bigger animal. When I opened the fridge, straight away he would try and get in it. I have to say “no, away”, didn’t work at first so we had to like use “away” and stamp our feet or splash him with water, he’d hate it and move it away. Now he knows “away”. So, we’ve been strict in that sense. He’s not allowed in the fridge or freezer. He got smart to us though, when he used to hear the tap running he used to shut his eyes and stand there. My partner has been better with him I think, because he’s male he has a stronger voice and he listens more to him than he does to me. He will run if he says “away”, but not when I do. He doesn’t hit him or anything, but he’s got that strength in his voice. If I were here on my own I think I'd have a totally different pig. I have friends on the Facebook group that really, really struggle with theirs. [Randall] seems very calm compared to others I've seen. Maybe because he was the runt, so he just keeps himself to himself but at night time he does like to come sit on the sofa with you. But yeah I think we’ve been successful having him in the house because we’ve been so, so strict with him. I thought, as well the more strict my partner has been with him, the more he likes him. He likes to go behind him between him and the sofa.

K: How big is he?

P: Maybe like knee height now. Maybe a bit shorter.

K: How does your relationship with your dogs differ from your relationship with [Randall]?

P: They get away with more. Well, because I've got a Boston terrier and a cocker spaniel, they’re just different temperaments. When I open the door, [Randall] runs and grunts at me to say hello but he won’t jump, but the dogs jump. I can give the dogs scraps and stuff from plates, obviously can’t do that with [Randall]. I wouldn’t say I have a different relationship as such, because they’re different animals. So that’s different. The things that are different are because of the legalities, we can take the dogs wherever we want but we can’t take [Randall]. I don’t say I treat them any differently as such but we have to communicate with [Randall] more harshly because of the fact he is a pig. If he’s going to do something he will cause more physical damage than the dogs.

K: Do you think that changes your emotional relationship with [Randall]?

P: Yeah, like other night the dogs practically sit on me but at the same time I sleep with [Randall] because when I stroke him, he will do his little grunts. It’s weird to explain but again I think because he is a pig he’s not gonna jump all over me. I mean he gets zoomies, don’t get me wrong. Yeah, I feel it’s a different type of emotional level. I don’t think we don’t have one, because we do. But I know when he’s upset because he’s more vocal. So, I think it’s different rather than not at all.

K: How do your family and friends think about you having a pet pig?

P: They think I'm crazy. It’s changed as he’s grown. When he was small they thought he was so cute and now when they see him they’re a bit like “woah”.

K: Do you think meeting him changes their perception of pigs?  
  
P: I think so. I think they realise how clever and emotional they can be. Before that, I don’t think they really thought about pigs, especially my friends who live in cities. I spent my weekends going to farms and stuff and my granddad had a smallholding so I've always been around animals. They haven’t been brought up around anything but dogs so I think they’ve been surprised at how intelligent, as well as how clean he is. The only thing is cleaning his toilet area and wipe his trotters when he comes in the house.

K: You said you had more of a background of farming, where you around working farms?

P: No just my granddad who had a smallholding and he kept them as pets, like chickens, geese, sheep and stuff. We’d go to like pet farms like you pay a couple quid and go round feeding animals with a bucket. Always had dogs, had pretty much... Horses, donkeys, reptiles, my sister fetched a baby duck once because it’s mother abandoned it, rabbits, guinea pigs, rats.

K: I have rats too. In a weird way I think rats and pigs as pets have some similarities because they are misunderstood.

P: Yes people think rats are dirty because they associate them with disease but they’re clean. I used to let them out all the living room. They’re emotional animals as well, they like your company.

K: Is there any aspect of pig care you struggled with when you got [Randall]?

P: It took me a long time, well more than it should of to toilet train him. That’s because *we* did it wrong. He was still quicker than the dogs. So, we gave him the whole room and not just a small spot. We should have given him a small spot.

K: What kind of things do you have to keep him occupied?  
  
P: Yeah we have like dog toys and rubber toys and stuff. He likes these fake sticks. They’re not meat but he loves chewing on them. We’ve got kong balls that we put coconut oil in them. Sometimes I'll just smear it on the floor. He loves bottles of pop, when we finish it we fill it with pellets. He has a horse ball but it’s chipped all the bloody paint so that’s outside now. I sometimes just bury his pellets in his blankets. We did have a snuffle mat but he kept weeing on it. He never slept much as a piglet during the day, now he’s getting more lazy.

K: Do you work out the house?  
  
P: Yeah my husband and I both work shifts, I think there’s only 3 or 4 days a month we are both out. In the summer, he will be outside anyway. To be fair I was dreading going back to work after lockdown, but it was absolutely fine he would just sleep. He’s always been quite independent, he hates being picked up so I don’t do it. But I see other people who got pigs at like 8 weeks who could pick them up, but I did it and he just screamed. Now he’s too big anyway so I thought there isn’t much point.

K: Has he had any health problems?

P: None. I’m meant to have wormed him I think in September so he’s overdue. We bought some wormer and it wasn’t right so... at the moment he’s in the house so it’s alright. When he’s out in summer I'll have to do it. The one I got... the people on the Facebook site all use the same one and this one was different so I didn’t want to risk it. It’s difficult as well because ideally, you can get one you inject which is stronger but because he is a house pig does he really need the full strength? Probably not. It’s also a battle I don’t want to inject him.

K: Do you find it challenging to find information for house pigs?  
  
P: Yeah. A couple weekends ago, I was under the impression that pigs live between 5 and 25 years, then I read a book more recently and mini pigs are only 15. Then it’s things like, when he dies.. You can’t bury him, you have to go through incineration. More recently someone on the pig page mentioned you can get private cremations. It’s to do with diseases, if you bury a pig, you could contaminate the land but is that really necessary for a house pig that doesn’t interact with others and has been restricted to a house and garden? But I'm hoping I can do the private cremation. I can’t imagine it though.

K: is the Facebook group useful to connect with other similar people?

P: Yeah when I first got [Randall], although it’s very helpful and I learn a lot from people, but people are quite opinionated. There’s always that person who knows everything, the one that’s had pigs all their life and doesn’t understand why a pig could be inside. When I first got [Randall] a woman messaged me and asked to ring me, she rang me every few days to see how I was getting on. I also met the girl who was struggling with her pig and another lady who lives just down the road actually. She knows someone who would look after [Randall] too so that’s good. But the page fills me in confidence because when I see other pigs, it makes me feel better about [Randall]. He is well-behaved and a good size. I think because he was the runt, he was the smallest. But yeah, it makes me feel better about him. When you have puppies, you think “am I doing the right thing?” but it made me feel confident seeing other pigs and that [Randall] is so well-behaved. He’ll give me his leg to put the harness on and everything. If I put it to his head he can push his head through. When he were little he would nip, but we’re out that stage now. Someone was telling me the other week that her pig charges at people.

K: Is he registered with a vet?

P: No. But the vet I have for the dogs is an old farm vet, he’s only down the road and so cheap. He always says if I have an issue just go to him. He was gonna do the injection wormer for us. But yeah he would come if we ever needed anything But yeah, I’ve heard from others with farm vets they will see the task at hand, whereas the owners will see them as their babies.

K: Do you get jokes from people about eating pigs?

P: I just ignore it now. People might say “oh, bacons coming”. There’s no point getting upset about it because they’re just words. At Christmas it’s worse, they say “he’s a good size to put in the oven.” I’m a teacher so my students say it all the time. It’s probably the only thing they can say because they don’t know anything about pigs other than they are meat. It’s the only joke they make. But it doesn’t bother me.

K: Do you eat meat?

P: I don’t eat pork, haven’t done for like 11 years. I don’t eat lamb.

K: Why pork and lamb?

P: It’s gonna sound stupid but I just think it tastes like what it is. It just tastes like... new. Bacon to me smells like what it is. It reminds me of walking in a pig sty. One of my ex-boyfriends were Romanian and he had a pig in the allotment, a big one. It were in a brickhouse like a sty and it was the length of the pig. We came back one day and there was this smell... I opened the freezer and there was this pig. That put me off, from then on. Never ate anything pork-related.

K: How did seeing that pig in the freezer make you feel?  
  
P: Awful. For the past week, I'd been stroking and feeding this pig. The worst thing was I felt they did it for me as a guest. I was like “i can’t eat that sorry”. When I drive to work there is always trucks and vans going by. A few weeks ago there was one with a little snout sticking out. I cried all the way to work, I was half an hour late because I was crying in the car park. I probably am oversensitive; I've always been like that it’s not because of [Randall]. Even a fly in the house I couldn’t kill it, I'd let it out.

K: So, how would you describe pigs to other people?

P: Physically or in terms of like how they are?

K: How they are.

P: This is weird and maybe even an awful thing to compare them to, but an autistic child. They like routine, they don’t like being overwhelmed, and breaking their routine can cause them harm. Very loving, very sort of like got high emotional intelligence. Easily trainable. At the end of the day they are a domestic animal, I was having this argument with a friend who is Indian and he was saying in India they domesticate elephants. I tried to tell him that pigs have always been domesticated, like you get wild boars, but like they are domesticated on farms and stuff. Elephants are wild. I said what you put an elephant through to domesticate them is much more rough than what we had to put [Randall] through. But he couldn’t see the difference between domesticating a pig and domesticating an elephant.

K: You say they have high emotional intelligence, how does [Randall] demonstrate that?

P: Noises. My god, when he is upset you know he is upset. He doesn’t do it often, mainly if my partner shouts at him he will run off and squeal. Same if he wants to go to the toilet. When he lays next to me it’s a softer grunt, when he is content. When he’s angry or upset you get the high squeal or really deep grunt. Especially at meal times at half 4.

K: How do you think he perceives his relationship with you?

P: I don’t know, he definitely sees my partner as the boss. Er, I think he’s more... like at night time he will go lay next to my partner and stuff but I think it’s more visible with me if that makes sense? If my partner comes in he will go up and grunt at him. If I come in he will come over and grunt but won’t leave until I stroke him. With me, he sits on my lap. Yeah, to be fair he probably just sees me as a stroker, feeder, and walker!

K: So is there not a strong bond on his side?  
  
P: I think so, because when we went away for the weekend and came back, he came flying through those gates. If he’s outside and sees my car pull in he comes right up to the gate and is hysterical till I come over. With me it’s more gentle, with my partner it is more respect. He’s more emotional with me but has more respect with him.

K: Yeah. Before we wrap up, what does the word biosecurity mean to you?

P: Don’t think I've heard of it.

K: So biosecurity is basically the things or practices used to minimise disease risk, so on farms you might clean your boots and things before entering.

P: Yeah, so what we do mainly is not let him eat out the kitchen. All food is stored separately from his. We won’t be as strict as the farmers because we’ve got no way to transmit to other pigs. My mum had a date request from this farmer, a pig farmer, and she said she couldn’t do it because if it were to go any further, he wouldn’t be able to come to our house because you can’t risk the transmission. They are so, so strict. They have so much disease control in place because he’s got a couple thousand pigs I think. But because we’ve got one single pig and we don’t live near other livestock, it’s not quite as rigid. Just, you know, avoiding going near takeaways and stuff or anywhere can pick up food and not feed him from the kitchen.

K: Do you get any communications from DEFRA?

P: No, not since the start I don’t think

K: Ok, to wrap up what is your favourite thing about pigs?

P: I just think they’re so cute and so sweet, I just love them. They’re so, I wanna say so innocent. You can stick a pig anywhere and I think it would be alright. You could stick it in a house and it would be alright, stick it in a shed, not saying that’s the right thing to do, but I think it would be... I don’t know, the way they are withc each other as well. Pigs always say to me pigs should go in pairs. I fully agree with that, but we weren’t in a situation to have two pigs, there were three left and we couldn’t have had three. Had [Randall] been left with the brother, we would have probably taken both. He was covered in pig marks too, so if we got another pig he would be at the bottom of the hierachy. Here, he is happy on his own. He loves the dogs. For his situation, I think we done the best. But yeah, I just think they’re so sweet-natured.