Interview with Kath (pseudonym) pet pig keeper

29th June 2022, in person at participants home.

Conducted by researcher [K]

K: So tell me about your relationship with these two

P: I'm really close to them, I would say I've got a closer relationship to them than I do with my dogs. I spend a lot of time with them, they are like my surrogate children. so yeah just I am really really close to them.

K: How do they fit into your family?

P: I guess that, well my other half will moan about them 'cause they're quite naughty, but he loves them just as much as I do. he just doesn't spend as much time with them as I do because they're quite naughty. he does a lot with them, he builds... like he was the one who built them their house [pigs grunts] you alright there boys? So, he built their house and everything.

K: yeah. What kind of feelings do you attach to them?

P: I think, even though I don't have children, I've got the same love for them that I would if I had a child. I can't stop, i never stop looking at them, I just think they're just the best thing ever. I can’t really put it into context.

K: What do you like about pigs in particular?

P: I love their intelligence, and the fact that they're really stubborn because they are so intelligent. The fact that they're so loving, and I just find them fascinating. How strong they are. You just do not realise how strong they are. [looking over at pigs] what else boys? The fact, like, they’re just amazing. When you watch them root and what they can do, how quickly they learn their tricks, and they know exactly what they are doing when they are being naughty. They’re just amazing.

K: How do you think they perceive their relationship with you?

P: To start off with, I had behaviour pigs with [Billy], the bigger pig, because he used to root on me constantly and erm, I was told that was because he was trying to get milk from me but I don’t know if that’s true. Obviously, that’s a problem. I couldn’t allow him to keep doing it because it would hurt. So, I ended up having all the advice in this country, which is either hit them or put a ring in their nose, which is absolutely appalling. So, I found a lady in America to do a zoom consultation and she agreed with me to do a timeout. Just from doing the time out you can see that they know what’s happening, so the first few he had no idea and then as soon as I said time out he would start throwing a paddy, making a lot of noise, and when I put him behind the gate he’d be screaming. He’d come in and do the rooting again and got straight back to a time out. Then after a time out probably four or five times, his voice would change and would be more whimpering. Then he’d be all affectionate. Sorry what was the question?

K: It was about how they perceive their relationship with you.

P: I’d say they treat me like another pig. It’s like, they accept me. I can lie on top of them and they wouldn’t be bothered. He would probably moan, make some noise, but they chose to come in with me and spend time with me. But then again, they are quite independent. In the evenings they have the doors open and in the summer they prefer outside but in the winter they will quite happily sit inside with me all evening. I would say they class me as their equal, and because I give them food as well I'm a good mummy pig.

K: Do you think they have an emotional bond with you?

P: Well, I would like to say yes but when I went away for five nights I thought they would really miss me and when I come home, like with a dog they would show their excitement, but they didn’t care because I had a friend come over and feed them, and she would bring people over as well so they had a lot of attention. I could see them on my camera the whole time. I thought, “oh they don’t love mummy pig as much as she thought” so I would be interested to know how or what their emotional connection really is.

K: I wonder of there would be a way to find out without people just putting their own feelings and emotions on to an animal.

P: yes, exactly. That would be really fascinating to know. Like when we came home, nothing. They didn’t even get out of bed! So I wish there was some way to know.

K: But they are affectionate with you?

P: really affectionate. At the moment, they just chill out, but if I was to get on the sofa they used to try get on top of me. Now they are older, they like to be around me but they don’t necessarily need to be touching me. Whereas [Bertie] used to always, well to be fair he still likes to always be touched. If im at the sink he will come up and put his nose on my leg, he just always wants to be touching me. [Billy] is not like that. But it is quite cute.

K: When you got them did you pick these two out specifically?

P: yeah.

K: What made you drawn to these two?

P: We wanted spotty pigs. So, we wanted the smallest pig of the litter but he was already taken. So, he was the next spotty one, and then [my husband] chose him because he looked like he has dominoes on him. It was really coincidental, after they had been born and we went to visit, they must have been about four weeks old, and these two were always hanging out together. So they were really bonded together before we got them so that was a nice coincidence.

K: Yeah? That’s sweet Where did you get them from?

K: Kew.

P: it’s either there or [another breeder].

K: How do you feel about pet pig keeping?

P: I think it should be made illegal to have just one pig on it’s own. I just think it is really cruel. Also, I don’t think it should be so easy to get a pet pig because obviously people can’t care for them. There’s also not enough information about pigs as pets, you can go on to the American Pig Association but their laws are different to our laws, so there definitely does need to be more research about pigs as pets.

K: What kind of things would you like to know about them?  
  
P: Like, exactly what they can eat. What’s good for them and what’s not so good for them. So ,like one one day you'll read like they can have broccoli, then the next day, it's like oh they can't because it gives them really bad wind, and I'm just like Oh my God! I was told they couldn’t have grapes, then I was told they could have grapes. So you just don’t have the confirmed what they can have. Also, I didn’t know they were supposed to be being vaccinated. I’ve never been told that. It was only because I was helping this other student and she said it would be beneficial that they were, but there’s just not enough information about diseases and things. Then you read the American ones but it’s different to what it is here.

K: Seems you’re always looking for information.

P: Yeah always. I saw online a free zoom meeting course. I missed the first one but they’ve given me the slides and I've got two more to watch.

K: These things are popping up about pet pigs.

P: Yeah, so obviously people are starting to look into it a lot more which is good.

K: And did you get a vet before you brought them home?

P: Yeah, I mean, I thought I did. two years ago, [Bertie] had a seizure. I called the vet out and the vet that they sent me was just horrific. so rude. so i asked him to leave.

K: Was this a farm vet?

P: yeah.

K: What happened?

P: he came to the property and didn't really even introduce himself. I thought ‘that's not good.’ He looked in the garden and just started questioning my husbandry skills. he said there's no grass for them, well no they dig it all up. I just felt he was really judging how I lived with them. i turned to him and said ‘you're a vet for commercial pig farmers and you have the audacity to turn around and question what I'm doing with my pigs?’ we ended up getting into a disagreement and i told him to leave.

K: what was his judgment on what was wrong with him?

P: Nothing, because we didn't get that far. He could see their coats were a bit greasy because they had suncream on and he said “it’s just a pig” and that’s when I said “you need to go”. It’s not just a pig.

K: How would you describe pigs?

P: just the best creatures. I don't know how would I describe you? [looking down at Bertie] I'm just obsessed by them. Look at their little faces. this is all i do every evening i just there looking at them. So [Bertie] is a really affectionate pig, whereas boba only wants cuddles when he wants cuddles. They're really trusting though, when I want to brush them, I can just pick up their trotters and move them around and they don't seem to care. They’ve very sweet. [the pig tries to get on the sofa with her]

K: in the first few weeks, how did you adjust to life with your new pet?

P: [Bertie tries to get on the sofa and lies with half his body on the floor and half on the sofa] this is not normal pig behavior! [laughs]. it went a lot better than what we expected. because I do doggy daycare, I was expecting the whole process to be very stressful because I have two dogs myself. It just wasn’t. I think because they were quite confident piglets they didn’t run or skit around the pen or anything. Before when we picked them up, we took my campervan up there and we got them in the crate ready to take them home. Then the campervan battery died. So, first off we had to get the RAC to come out. Then, the first night we let them out and they were eating happily straight away, we let our dogs out when they were in the pen and they were sniffing and interested. After a couple of days, we put the dogs on harnesses and properly introduced them and there wasn’t any problems. At the time, the dogs were bigger than the pigs. When my daycare dogs come, they’re interested but not reactive with the pigs. But I don’t let the pigs out with other people's dogs.

K: How do you think your bond has changed in the couple years you’ve had them?

P: So, from the start they have always been quite confident with us. we thought we wouldn’t be able to handle them for some time but they were really chilled out pigs from the start. When they were piglets I would say that they were, obviously because I did a lot of training with them, teaching gentle manners. yeah I think I ended up getting a stronger bond with them because they were associating me with good rewards. They were a lot more, I would say they were lot more wanting to actually be on me when they were piglets to now, they're happy to lie next to me and just receive their attention. I think I am their the servant really! I give them massages and brushes and food.

K: is it OK that they might not have that strong emotional connection with you?

P: As long as they are happy. I would be devastated if I thought they were unhappy, but yeah I don't think, they don't look unhappy. They wouldn't be letting everyone handle them I don't think.

K: are they happy with everyone?

P: Yep. With kids too. I’ve never known them to be angry, apart from when we tried to inject them.

K: do you think that's because you've built trust with them overtime or is it just in their nature?

P: I think because they’ve been handled from day one, and then obviously on the farm they were skittish kind on the farm but you could kind of stroke them. but then when we brought them home and put them in the garden, they were never skittish. you could just handle them. when they start coming in the house it wasn't forced, it was up to them if they wanted to come in. and then gradually overtime, they started to getting more confident to come in.

K: are there things you wish that you could do with them that you can’t?

P: absolutely. I wish that, I wish we could just do like American people do, just be able to take them out like a dog, because to me that would be beneficial for the pigs. But then also I'd be so worried about doing that with how people's dogs could react, because they are prey animals at the end of the day. But I would like to be able to take them places. Then also with the, being able to move them, you’ve got to be do the movement act thing and you’ve got the standstill for twenty days if you move them somewhere. Then I was told I'd have to apply for a permit, then they told me that was something different.... again, you get different information.

K: it’s confusing?

P: Yeah, I got this lady’s name. Just as COVID hit, I had this elderly customer who was bedridden and I was going to take the pigs to her to cheer her up, but it was just so difficult. So, I phoned up and they said that because I was only going to go for an hour, I could just log the movement, but I thought you had to do the stand still, but she said not for that. I didn’t take them in the end because I was too worried.

K: Do you think they would enjoy it?

P: I think they would love it. Saying that, I don’t know now if they would because they haven’t been around those different experiences. I did have a walking license when we were in our old house and they enjoyed going down the road but that was a long time ago and they haven’t been able to go for over a year. I don’t know if they’d enjoy it now.

K: You have quite a busy road out there.

P: yeah, I wouldn’t even contemplate walking them here. If they got spooked and something awful happened.

K: Yes, people could stare out their cars too.

P: Or beep a horn and that could freak them out maybe. Saying that, they don’t seem to respond to noise. They seem to be pretty chilled out about that. They do sometimes get freaked out if they see, if they’re not expecting you to come in with like a bucket or a large object, they can get skitty.

K: Cautious animals.

P: Yeah, but I'm not used to seeing them suddenly jump because they don’t normally do it.

K: what is it about the pigs that are kind of like your children rather than your dogs?

P: I just, I think maybe just their intelligence and the way they are. A dog just wants to please you most of the time, whereas you’ve got to earn a pigs trust. You cant just tell a pig to do something because they aren’t going to do it. You’ve got to politely ask and maybe bribe them. It’s hard trying to put into words. I can’t have children naturally, so they are now my babies. I don’t know, maybe just the relationship with how close they are, their vocal sounds and how they are always touching each other.

K: Can you tell what their vocalisations mean?

P: Some of them I can, and some of them I wish I knew what they were saying. They’ve definitely got a sound for when they are trying to get my attention, and when they are excited, and when something... they sometimes like bark. Which is quite funny. What other noises do you do? [puts hand on [Bertie]]. But yeah, I can with some of them but there are a lot I don’t know what they are.

K: do you have quite good communication with them?

P: um, I would say so. Because it’s always been, like with the training I’ve done it’s always been positive. If I need them to do something it’s always reinforced by food. Being able to handle them, I think it’s good they trust me enough so I can open up their mouths and handle their trotters and stuff. I can tickle them here [tickles Billy’s arm pit, he does not react]. They love their ears being cleaned. I think because they trust me I can handle them.

K: Their ear tags, did you have to do that yourself?

P: No, that was done on the farm. Yep. I wish there was a different thing, it just looks like a big blimmin’ hole and I'd hate to see it being done, it’s awful.

K: Do you wish they didn’t have them?

P: Yes.

K: It would be cool to have a collar or something.

P: Something a lot more kinder too them. Even like a microchip.

K: I don’t know if that’s a thing, I've hear you can get it but it might be prone to infection so I'm not sure.

P: Oh really? You’d think maybe if the research is done eventually and they start treating pigs more humanely, maybe down the line they will be nicer ways.

K: I know some people who keep the tags but don’t have them in.

P: See, part of the walking license is that you have to have it in. I wouldn’t want to take it out, I'd be too worried about what if the hole healed up and they’d have to go through that pain again.

K: I wonder how it feels in comparison to us getting our ears pierced.

P: I know, yeah. Cos, I found mine bloomin hurt! And it’s right in the middle [points to [Bertie]’s ear], I just wish there were more humane ways to do it.

K: What is your favourite thing to do with them?

P: I think just chill out with them. I like just lying down with them and reading my books. They used to jump out on the sofa which is why we’ve got a step here, but obviously it’s not good for them. They do use the step unless they get excited, but I like just like lying on the floor with them.

K: Do you think they help your own health and wellbeing?

P: Yeah, definitely. When I'm with them, I'm a lot less anxious. I suffer from anxiety and depression, and when i’m with them it makes me feel better just being with them.

K: What is it about them?

P: I think it’s just the calming effect of them. They just love being stroked, so you just sit there and it’s like.... [strokes]

K: Calming?

P: Yeah.

[rustling in background]

K: Are they not bothered by sounds in the house like the rustling?

P: No, unless it is feeding time. When we cook they sometimes make a noise.

P2: it’s more like a shriek (husband)

P: make the noise!

P2: I don’t know this person!

P: [my husband] can make the piggy sound quite well.

P2: they’re good boys normally.

K: I see you both have pig tattoos!

P: Oh yeah.

K: When did you get yours?

P: within about six months of having them.

K: Why did you chose to get them?

P: they were the ones I did first as well [her sleeve depicts lots of other pets] all my other animals had to wait. I don’t know, just because I love them so much.

K: Wanted them there forever.

P: Yeah! They’re just so cute

K: It’s a nice way to memorialize them after they pass.

P: that’s what this one is [points to a dog tattoo].

K: I have my cat who really passed away tattooed on my leg too. She was about 18.

P: Oh bless, they live so long!

K: I was talking to someone else recently about the laws and what you can do when a pig dies with their body.

P: Oh yeah, it’s awful. You have to do it the livestock way, it will be horrific.

K: I think you can do individual cremations but I'm not sure how easy it is, in Wales I don’t think you can.

P: I think we would have to fight for that. I'd definitely be doing that!

P2: [whispering] hog roast

P: No! I’ve got my dog ashes in a ring … but they’re never going to die, they’re going to grow wings and be happy piggies! For ever and ever and ever and ever.

P2: They will be waking God up at quarter to 7 in the morning wanting their food.

P: Do the sound when they want their breakfast! Please!

P2: I’ll mess it right up.... reeeee!

P: That was rubbish.

P2: that was rubbish that one.

P: How do you feel about your relationship with the pigs?

P2: strained. A strained relationship. It’s good though! She is obsessed with them.

P: look! ‘cause you’re talking he’s all excited! [[billy]s head is propped up]

P2: Oh yeah, I love them, I lay down and have a cuddle but not often.

K: Sounds like you’re the more practical one building things for them.

P2: I try to reign her in a little bit! She says we need heating and stuff.... they live outside they don’t need it! I try to...

P: We’ve compromised with it. We said 16 degrees out there.

P2: Nine!

P: One day daddy will let you sleep overnight in here. [talking to pigs] you would love that boys wouldn’t to!?

P2: Very spoilt. If there was a practical way of having them inside, then great, but unfortunately, they are destructive.

P: It wouldn’t be fair to keep them in all day.

P2: You could have a big pig flap, that would be great. But this room would have to be totally empty, couldn’t have any furnishings because they will chew. Even our floor they’ve dug their teeth into.

P: it’s new things daily, or weekly. Like yesterday, they ate the door on their house.

K: part of having a pig!

P: Exactly, you just adapt as you go. Can't do that now, can’t have that there.

K: How was your life changed since you’ve had them?

P: I don’t think it has. It doesn’t affect us going out, it doesn’t affect us having people round. It has affected me going away overnight because I don’t want to leave them. Because I have them in every single evening I think it would be really cruel just to have someone come over and feed them and then leave. So, I have to try and find someone to stay here who is obviously confident with the pigs too. So, I think that is the hardest thing for me because I don’t want to go away and leave them.

K: Do you have any other stories that might give me insight into the type of relationship you have with them?

P: When he was a little teeny piglet, we had a small coffee table and he used to love to walk under it and then the table would stay on him, and he’d walk round with the table on him. We used to call it his piggy armor. We have the tumble dryer in here for the pigs because the heat comes out the bottom and they love it. In the winter that is their favourite spot. When they were piglets and being naughty, [my husband] used to put the tumble dryer on to make them go to sleep. Last year they did agility, I set up the jumps, only tiny ones, they learnt to go through tunnels as well. What else? Some stories boys... I've got lots I'm sure. I feel bad now I can’t think!

K: do you think your family and friends understand the bond you have?

P: I think anyone who comes round loves them. When we have people over for drinks the pigs are always out, people don’t get to socialise with pigs so it’s nice for them. Everyone wants to sit out here with them rather than the other room. You can’t ignore them! As you can see, they just lie down. Yeah, so everybody... I think [my husband’s] parents don’t really understand it. They don’t have much to do with them when they stay.

K: is there anything else you’d like to add about the emotional side of keeping pet pigs?

P: [Billy] no rooting! He hasn’t done that in ages. No, I don’t think so.