Interview with Maya (pseudonym) pet pig keeper

3rd February 2022, online.

Conducted by researcher [K]

K: How long have you had her?

P: Just over two years ago.

K: Why did you want a pet pig?

P: We just wanted a pig. We’ve got dogs, we’ve got tortoises, and we just wanted a pig. In all honesty I don’t know if I realised, I mean a pig is a pig, I probably didn’t realise how much personality a pig could have. My husband brought her home and put her in the garden because she was being sick from travelling, it was like this strange animal in your house, like you have a dog but we know what a dog is like. Just didn’t realise how much you’d get to know a pig. This is where I sound like a complete mad woman again. I’m glad we’ve got her, definitely.

K: What were you expecting to get out having a pet pig?

P: I don’t know to be honest. I do think obviously you see certain things on Instagram and you think that they will do certain things and this isn’t the reality of it. They do get big. I think we got her and there’s a thing in there about how much they’ll grow to be, I think it was something like 16 kilos, something ridiculous. She s probably well over 60 now, which isn’t a problem. We have her now, regardless of how big she is going to get. But that is why a lot of people end up rehoming their pigs, because they don’t stay small. Like a puppy doesn’t stay a puppy.

K: Was the small size something that enticed you at the beginning?

P: I don’t know, I think we just wanted a pig. It was me and the kids, my husband didn't want a pig. It was me an the kids who kept saying let's have a pig, we went to have a look at some different farm. They just had piglets and obviously piglets are tiny, when they showed us the parents I was like “boys I'm really sorry but we can’t have one of those in the house”. Imagine that running around in the kitchen. Then we found the breeder and they were smaller, and all she’s done is proven that you can have a pig that big in the kitchen! She’s about the same size anyway.

K: Where did you first realise you could actually have a pig as a pet?

P: Someone that I'm friends with has a pig as a pet, someone I used to run with has a pig but he doesn’t put it on Facebook very often and all of a sudden he got this pig, I think his son bought it as a micro-pig and then he was lumbered with it. He doesn’t walk it or anything, this big pig is just like a proper pot bellied pig in the garden. So, I think that was the first time I realised you could have a pet pig and then I looked into it more, saw you had to get CPH and stuff. That makes you think it’s really hard work, but actually it isn’t. It puts you off a bit. But no, it’s not hard once you get through it. But yeah, we are lucky [Orla] is really good.

K: And you mentioned social media as well?

P: Yeah, I just love animals to be honest. If I could have a goat and some chickens I'd have the whole lot. I’d have a pig, a bit of everything. Because we’ve got two dogs, we can take the two dogs when we go on holiday but we couldn’t take a third dog. You wouldn’t leave the dog at home because that’s not fair. But a pig is different, you can’t take a pig on holiday so that’s probably what we thought, it made sense to us.

K: You got her from [breeder name] right?

P: Yeah

K: What was the process like there, did you pick her out individually?

P: So when we started looking, we’d initially been to another farm and they obviously wanted to sell the pig, they didn’t tell us anything about having a license , not being able to take them out and stuff, she said they’re really hardy pets, you wouldn’t need to insure them, they don’t get ill. She said if you do have an ill pig, you’re really unlucky. That kind of shut it down, I kind of said I'll carry on looking. It was the week as we went into lockdown, we had to do it online. So, yes we did choose her out of a litter that were left. I did initially want a boy, they were more expensive. Then there was [Orla], she just said she’s a lovely little pig, she was 4 months old at the time. We did all the research and everything, the pig keeping course and everything, all online. I’ll be honest, had we have gone down and mu husband would have seen her mum, I think he would have said no, so I think I'm glad it happened the way it did. So yeah, it was all online. My husband went to get her on his own. He was very scared of getting caught of going out because it was lockdown, but because of the movement thing we had the paperwork and stuff.

K: did you see a picture of her before?

P: Yeah, they sent us photos and videos before we picked her up.

K: And you chose her out of the litter?

P: Yeah, there weren’t many left of the litter, there were some due to be born. We took what was available, which sounds really awful, but as it happens, her brother lives 5 miles up the road so we are friends. It’s a nice little group, we know her family. I think after us it was the proper lockdown pigs, so people were stuck at home and thought it would be good to get a pig, then were stuck when the pubs reopened and they couldn’t take them.

K: Was there anything about [Orla] in particular that enticed you?

P: I might be wrong, but I think there was just boys left, maybe one or two girls. On the side of her body, her markings looked like a little flower. But I don’t think we chose a pig, I think we just had what was available and it was meant to be!

K: Did you find the registration stuff easy?

P: Yeah really easy. We were supposed to give it a few weeks, but they did it straight away.

K: Has she had her ear tagged?

P: Yes, they did that at [the breeder]. She’s got that in still.

K: Do you have any thoughts about her having to have an ear tag?

P: No, you have to have them done by law don’t you. It’s one of those. She lives in our house, she walks round the block, we don’t go very far. I don’t think people would notice if she had an ear tag in or not. Sometimes they pop out and we have to put a new one in. A house pig, I don’t think it’s necessary, but it’s the law to have a tag in their ear. That’s it, it’s still in.

K: How would you describe your relationship with her?

P: Close. She’s like my little shadow. She’s a massive part of... like to dog has their routines but she’s different. I’ve always felt that because the dogs have got each other and that pigs are more intelligent, you are different with a pig than a dog. They understand you a bit more. You don’t just ignore her all day.

K: How much of your daily routine involves caring for her?

P: She sleeps in the dining room. The dogs are crated because I work with chocolate. [Orla] sleeps next to them on her bed, she has a little bed and a duvet. So I get up early and walk downstairs to go to the bathroom. As soon as she hears me she runs in to the bathroom to brush her teeth with me. She has a bit of toothpaste, then she goes back to bed. I go to work and then the boys get up with her and feed her. Then she goes back to bed. She has quite a lazy morning, then a banana at 1 o’clock on the dot. You can set your watch by her, the minute it’s 1 o’clock she will tell you it’s banana time. Then she has her tea at 4ish. A banana at 7, a carrot at 20 past 7... she’s very time specific! When I go to bed she will come in the bathroom again and have a bit of toothpaste and then go to bed for the night. My husband works from home so there is always someone at home. If I go out it’s not for long, she’s never really on her own.

K: What kind of feelings do you associate with her?

P: I love her. Obviously I care about her. A couple of months ago she just wasn’t right in herself. She went really, really quiet and yeah... we got the vet out. She was absolutely fine. But the thought of not having her around is horrible. Don’t get me wrong, when you’ve got the kids and the dogs, sometimes it’s an absolute pain in the bum. You’re trying to watch tele and she is trotting round the wooden floor and won’t settle. Or when she is in season, which only lasts two or three days, but she grunts constantly. That is annoying, like a baby if it just cried constantly. So, I'm not going to say that she’s not a tie, she’s a pain the bum... but wouldn’t be without her at all. She’s just got the most gorgeous little face. It doesn’t matter where you are, her face is there! If we’re in the garden she will just stand at the back door looking at you. She’s just got a lovely face. The kids don’t spend much time with her now, they just spend their time in the bedrooms.

K: Do you worry about her getting unwell?

P: Yeah, because I mean obviously on the pig page I've seen it first hand. If your pig goes quiet, or gone off their food. I was always told if they don’t eat within twenty minutes then call a vet. I see all the time people posting that their pig hasn’t eaten for two days, well it’s gonna die. They are not hardy animals. If they get poorly, chances are they will die if they don’t get seen to straight away. Our experience with out farm vet is really good, he’s out within half an hour if I need advice or anything, he came out once and and it was £80 and he gave her an anti-inflammatory just in case. He said ring me at any point. People just say “oh, I'll see how they go”.. No, it’s not a huge amount of money to save your pigs life. I know I'm going to have to deal with it one day but I don't know how I'd cope with my pig dying.

K: do you know what will happen when she dies?

P: no, no. I think we have someone who would cremate her. But I really don't know what you do when a pig dies, because there's obviously gonna be some kind of... I don't know. Like with a dog, you don’t really look into what’s going to happen when they die. We have got a pet... like a pet crematorium, a vet that does cremations and stuff, they do horses and stuff so I'm pretty sure, I've thought I should have contacted them to ask if they can do it but I think they can. Or our farm vet could help us. I’m 90% sure I know what to do.

K: so would you like to get her ashes back?

P: oh God, yeah. I know people who have lost their pigs and yeah you can get them and the ashes back.

K: How do you think [Orla] perceives her relationship with you?

P: I don't know I say to her “am I your pig friend?”... I don't know she clearly loves us. We've got the only pig who doesn't roll over when you touch their tummy. I don't know why but last night she came up to me and put her weight on me and I touched her tummy and she rolled over for the first time. I think she loves us, oh, she must stay because she comes and gets in the bed with us on a Saturday and Sunday morning. She trusts us, she used to run off if someone knocked on the door, now she is there before you. so yeah, I think she does trust us. We feed her so she must love us

K: You said you’re her pig friend, what do you mean by that?

P: like, I don't know if she knows that I'm not a pig. when she goes to bed she rolls over I sometimes go over for a cuddle and she does this really happy grunting and she is content. Once she escaped, the gate blew open and she got out. She only walked round the corner and we have this factory shop at the top of the road, they must have recognized her and they put a note on our door saying that we have got your pig. I went round there and she did this excited grunt that I'd never heard before when she saw me. I think she was excited that I was there but also that she had an adventure. That was a completely different side to her. So, she recognizes us. She knows her name and understands words. She sits lovely.

K: so she fits into the family quite well?

P: oh yeah.

K: would you say she is part of the family?

P: Oh yeah, she's definitely part of the family. I think I have more photos of the pig than my kids. she spends more with me.

K: do you actively work on building up your bond with her?

P: I don't think I have to really because we're both at home all the time.

K: how do you interact with her?

P: sometimes I get down on the floor and she will get her snout and do that thing... what's it called? Rooting. She'll root like she would with another pig. Gets her snout in and gives you a good poke about with it.

K: how does your bond with [Orla] compare to your bond with your other pets?

P: this sounds horrible but, I had a dog before and I lost him when he was 12 quite suddenly. I'd had him since I was twenty and I was absolutely devastated. I could cry now talking about it because it's been nearly nine years and it broke my heart So, I'm deliberately not close to my two dogs now like I was with him. That's probably the mistake I've made with [Orla], because she's not a dog, I mean I love my dogs. One has a lifelong illness and we take care of her, but I don’t have that relationship with my dogs that I did with my old dog and that I have with [Orla]. The dogs have each other and because [Orla] is an only pig, I suppose it’s like having a child.

K: Has having her impacted your own health and wellbeing?

P: I think she’s definitely good for me. She is good to have around especially with the whole lockdown thing and for the kids as well going through that time. i think my husband when he looks at me with her he knows that she has been good to have around.

K: In what way is she good to have around?

P: I think, like last night. So, she's blowing her coat right now and I think it must itch. I sat with her last night and you can put this oil spray on them. I was just brushing her in the garden and he looked at me and I think he can just tell that she makes me so happy.

K: you said that it's clear she loves you too. Do you have any stories that could give me insight into kind of the way she shows love for you?

P: when she comes to you and just rests her head on you. or when she gets up on the bed and lies between the two of us. You can just tell that she likes us. She is happy, her tail is constantly wagging. Because the sun has been out we've noticed that she is really happy when we are out in the garden with her.

K: how has your life changed since you've had [Orla]?

P: I don't know if it really has. We are quite homely people anyway; I mean we probably don't go out quite as much for as long. We are all right to leave her for a bit, I think the most we'd probably leave her is 3 hours. All she really does is go in her bed or, in this whether she would sunbathe. I don't think she gets up to much else. She certainly doesn't show any signs that she's distressed or anything. If we do go out, like Saturday we were out all day, my mum will come over and just sit with her for the day. We do have a friend who will look after her too. You're allowed almost like a second home, within a 10 mile radius. So our friend lives on her walk route and she can have her there. She would have her if we went on holiday or anything. We are quite lucky with that.

K: do your friends and family understand the relationship you have with her?

P: we've only really got my parents as family to be honest, and they are not pet people at all. They do get that I love animals though. my mom will look after her but she is not keen on staying over to help with her. Me and my husband went away the other week and she stayed over but the boys were also there to help with her. It depends what kind of person you are really if you like animals you will like her, if you don't you probably won't. but yeah my parents aren't really pet at all.

K: Are people ever surprised that you do have this kind close bond with a pig?

P: I don’t know. Not really asked anybody, I don’t really care what people think. I love animals and that's it. I don't really care if people care.

K: do you ever find the legal side of owning a pet pig difficult?

P: no, it's easy. I would even say it is too easy. You just go online and get a license, yes, environmental health do come round And check your walking route. that is a bit more difficult comma especially for us as it was in lockdown and we had to wait weeks. But to get a CPH number to keep a pig is really really easy. They should make that difficult. They should inspect your property. You can get a CPH number if you live in a flat. How can you have a pig in a flat? They should also ask if you are allowed a pig on your property. People get a pig and then turn around and say ‘Oh my landlord isn't happy’. Then they have to get rid of it. So that part is probably too easy. There are so many people who don't want their pigs, and it's the same with dogs and stuff but it's just too easy to get a pig and in comparison to a dog it's actually quite cheap to buy. Then people get them and realize they are a bit of a tie, you can't bring them in the car. People ask me “can you bring her over to mine?” and no, I can't. People want one and I say to remember that you can't just take it out like a dog, and if you aren't being told that by someone who just wants a bit of money... That pig isn't going to have a home for much longer.

K: would you say you are concerned about pet pigs?

P: when I got [Orla], I thought the breeder was really good. Then people said “well she doesn't try to sell them in pairs”. We couldn't have got two pigs. I always said if se was going to be home alone a lot it would be really unfair just to have one but she's not on her own and I don't feel as bad. There was a lot of criticism about [the breeder] for that reason. you just but now I see it from the mini pig page pigs go through it all the time because people don't want them anymore or they become a nuisance, and they get churned out. So I see it from that point of view now, they are just a breeder, and they just want to make money

K: do you have a favorite activity to do with [Orla]?

P: I don't no dot I think when she has a strawberry, she does the best sitting for a strawberry. I take for a walk but she is a really slow walker. there is a pub that we deliberately put on the walk route with the beer garden. they don't serve food there either so we can take her. there was a couple of guys there who absolutely loved her and bought us some peanuts so that was nice call mom it's nice when we get positive reactions but they are not all positive. you get the stupid comments after two years in after two years it gets quite annoying.

K: like what?

P: Is that a pig? Yeah it's a pig. Is it a goat? No it's not a goat. Are you going to eat it? No, we aren't going to eat it. Just stupid stuff, like, I can smell bacon OK. Is that your son's dinner. Yeah things you wouldn't say to someone with a dog. Like, pigs are food. You wouldn't get someone coming up to you and asking if you're going to eat your dog when it's dead. It's the detachment with animals. Since we got all if we all went vegetarian and now we are all vegan. but yeah, people almost enjoy talking about your dead pig. they wouldn't do it with a dog. Yesterday, my son found a bug in his food and freaked out, when two years ago he would have eaten a cow. So, yeah it's the detachment from animals

K: would you say [Orla] has made you think about your food more?

P: yeah, once you understand a pig and how fearful they are and how frightened they are, they have got feelings, they can react and they can communicate. When you look at the process and the slaughtering it's horrendous. yeah she kind of made me think about it, I knew it was happening but when you see it... If you have a dog you don't want to see them in China going off to the meat market, it's the same with the pig

K: future would you ever get more pigs in the future?

P: if I had the land, yes where we are at the minute we don't have the space. Everyone says to me oh you need a little smallholding, yeah I'm well aware that's what I need. I'd absolutely love to get a little bit of land, not a lot of land. I'd probably have another pig, a couple of goats... it's the dream.

K: if [Orla] was to pass away would you consider getting another pig?

P: no. I think we've been really really lucky with [Orla]. I have seen her brother, in the garden he lives in the garden of a house he has smashed through the fence so many times, he's really naughty. OK right I think I've had a life with a pig and I'm happy with that. not because they're not amazing animals, if I lose her I think it's going to really really devastate me and I don't want to do that again. We got really lucky with her, we couldn't find another her. Unless I have land.

K: so she is a unique member of the family for you

P: yeah, we are going to commit as long as she needs and I think that's a big commitment to make. I dare say that once we don't have a pig we could probably do things we can't do now

K: but you don't think that's something you're necessarily giving up now yeah?

P: yeah, life has just adapted life has adapted like it would if you had kids and you can't do certain things. we don't go out much, the kids have got their hobbies. it just works. she fits in.