Interview with Claudia (pseudonym), pet pig breeder.

30th June 2022, online.

Conducted by researcher [K].

K: Can you tell me how the business came about?

P: So, the business came about as my daughter watched Babe a lot, and Charlotte’s Webb at the time. She was like “can we get a pig? Can we get a pig?”. We had dogs, and it wasn’t really suitable with the dogs. They sadly passed away and then she continued to ask for a pig. I looked into it, found these little pigs, saw Victoria Beckham had some. I looked into it and did some research, got books, went to the library, and then decided to turn it into a business. I then contacted a Business Enterprise Scheme to help businesses get on their feet. I was 29 nd approached them, did a business course and a business plan with them. Submitted that, and twice they said no, there was a recession so they wanted hairdressers and plumbers... it was a bit out there for them. I did explain to them that the pet industry was a billion pound industry, it was something I thought that would get interest. Particularly in this country as people are animal lovers. I just went ahead with it anyway, and did eventually get the loan as they went above the boards recommendation and gave it to me anyway. I then built my garden into a garden farm and started [the business]. I then started breeding the pigs and going out to parties, events, schools, pet shows. Then I needed more space, so got another field, then eventually another farm. I then came to [current site], obviously I lived at home with the pigs in the beginning, spending a lot of time with them in the day, getting to know them and growing them up and seeing them become parents too. I got to know the pigs really well and did lots of things with them, like I say, parties, pet shows, TV shows, photo shoots, you name it. Did lots of going round the country to events and shows and schools and all sorts of crazy stuff. It was good fun but very tiring but got through it. But I wasn’t really a big fan myself, never really liked pigs at all, I likes dogs and cats, but when you spend time with them they are actually quite lovely animals. They are very relaxing and chilled. I didn’t know how intelligent they are. I kinda bonded with a pig. She is no longer with us, sadly she died from Leukemia, but I did a lot with her, photoshoots and all sorts. She had about five litters of her own, so we got quite close to her. She was my daughter's favourite pig. I had a lot of communication with her and noticed pigs would speak to one another, different things like mums would speak differently to their babies and they would come running. You can tell they understood what the mum was saying to them, I found that quite fascinating. They understood me as well, like commands, come here, sit, go away or... I’ve seen a pig cry before. Gertrude used to cry when her piglets were taken away from her, until she lost her voice. So, they do have emotions, all animals do. Especially when you have them in their family environments and you see them with their family and their friends, they really have different personalities and you’ve always got a more dominant pig than others. some pigs really like each other, and some pigs really don't like each other. some pigs can't live together, and some pigs can't live without each other. Over the years kind of know who's who and who can live with who and who gets along, and the different personalities. Definitely breeding does make a difference because you could see down certain pigs lines the behavior there's certain pigs compared to other pigs. For instance, Maggie is a really really chilled out pig and her and Jack had litters and over time you can see the traits through their lineage. Not just their features, but their characteristics as well as their looks and their behaviour. With certain pigs I've definitely been like “i'm not gonna breed from you because you're a bit of a Moody pig” or etcetera... Or some pigs didn’t have many litters, and in in the litters were small amounts like Peggy had two litters of three, so I wouldn’t breed from her again. But Maggie, she would have litters of ten, all lovely pigs. They were always super healthy and stayed smaller than the parents. Very good looking pigs, relaxed and never aggressive, which came back from Jack and Scarlett days, then Maggie and Timmy. They’re all here still. So there are traits, farmers will tell you that too, certain traits, like Gertrude, I wouldn’t breed from her anymore, she was a very moody pig. They are very relaxed here because they have a set routine, have a nice home and a nice environment, and they've got good balance of you know people come to see them and then they have their time on their own like.. 5:00 o'clock in the evening until 9:00 o'clock in the morning the places theirs. they don't have customers on a Monday and then during the week it is pretty quiet, so over the lockdown I definitely noticed they were getting bored from not having human interaction, before 2019 we're extremely busy you know. 100 people a day sometimes 150 a day on the weekend. sometimes more. it has definitely reduced since lockdown and COVID and everything. you could see that when customers come back they were super excited about having interactions, they liked having strokes and tickles and people loving them and stuff. So, I did my own research watching programs and stuff online about pigs, lots of experiments you know scientific research with you know puzzles and learning games and apps... and dialect, they have dialect, they definitely have dialect. I see them talking and then when I talk to them they talk back to me. In pig language but I definitely say hello to them they'll say hello back. And watching male and female behaviour, so, watching the males have their arguments and they sort it out pretty quickly, but females can have a grudge for weeks.

K: Really?

P: They do, they do. Some pigs, like Delilah, did not get along with Rosa. Delilah could never live in the same pen and used to attack her, it was horrible. Jack and Pat could never live in the same pen. They live next door to each other now, but was because pen 10 flooded and they had to move them in there. It took a long time for them to, you know, settle down next door, they're 2 entire male entire boars so you do is have a smaller pigs in with them to avoid conflict, but they sort it out pretty quickly anyway. Females, when you’ve got a hierarchy of females and you put a new one in there, there is gonna be a big scrap because you have to reestablish who is the boss again. We’ve got a pretty good balance at the moment, everyone likes living with each other. May is quite a diva-ish people, everyone is like “oh May has broken this, May has done that, nipped me or..”. She can be a bit PMS, so when she is coming into season and gets hormonal. She is possessive of her pen and doesn’t like people coming near her really. She is the only problematic pig we’ve got here at the moment.

K: what do you think it is about Pigs that makes them good as pets?

P: because they look after themselves and their low maintenance. that's the beauty of them, they don't need fussing over. You know, as long as they've got food, water and shelter and company, they’re happy. And they're not demanding or needy, and they're just so maintenance and you can't be allergic to them so a lot of people it's it's an issue if they are allergic to cats, dogs etc. They are pretty cheap to keep as well, they don't cost as much as a dog would cost. Quite Hardy, they live outdoors, mine do anyway. They don't get very sickly often, I mean we do have a strict biosecurity here, we also have strict worming and vaccinations and stuff. Very rarely do the pigs get ill, so the veterinary costs are pretty low, but because I have a lot of animals the costs are a bit more commercial. they are easy to make happy.

K: then so obviously you said that most people would keep them outdoors but how about if someone chose to keep a pig predominantly indoors?

P: they shouldn't you shouldn't keep it pig predominantly indoors. They are an outdoor animal, in the wild they would forage etc etc. I always say to my customers that you must have an outside pen area, don’t just give them the run of the garden because they will wreck it and stuff. I insist they all have a specific pen area, doesn’t have to be huge, even 8x4m as a bedroom space. Then they can have recreational space playing in the rest of the garden and they can have walks and stuff. But, my customers do house train, as you can house train in two days. You have to pig proof and put things away, but a lot of my customers do let them in the house, others are quite strict and say they are outdoor only. Because they get along with other animals like dogs, cats, and rabbits, they’re not very aggressive. They aren’t phased by very much and not much upsets them, noise or... people, or sounds. They are very clean, they do all their toilets in a designated space, they keep their beds clean and they keep their pens clean. If you find a dirty pig it’s because it’s a dirty farmer. But obviously in the winter months you get a lot of mud and stuff if it’s raining and stuff, so I have them in a barn, or bring them in, or woodchip their pens. But mud doesn’t bother them, they quite like it.

K: One thing I am trying ot get an estimate on is how many pet pigs there are in the UK, it seems like a difficult thing to find out. Have you noticed increases or decreases in your sales over time?

P: You could contact the RPA and they issue CPH numbers, you could maybe speak to them and they can give statistics on how many in the last ten years, how many have gone up on smallholdings. I think you will see there will be an increase particularly in the last five years.

K: Thank you, I think that’s the best way to go but you might lump in commercial smallholders with companion pigs. As a breeder, do you see any changes in demand over time?

P: Erm, this year is a bit more quiet. Last year and the year before we had much more inquiries than we do now. So, it’s a difficult thing to answer because of COVID and lockdown, there was all this puppy madness. Everyone bought dogs and things. But not everyone can have a dog so...

K: A lot of people I spoke to go their pigs around the start of lockdown and I wonder if there was a similar thing with pigs as there was with dogs.

P: We did sell a lot more in the lockdown, but that was also to do with the fact we didn’t have any customers here so I had much more time on my hands to designate time to pig sales. But now, there is not as much time I have to do it.

K: Is there an idea you have for the ideal peat pig?

P: Yeah, so pigs should be below the knee, that’s anywhere between 18 and 24 inches from shoulder to trotter. Anything between a cocker spaniel and a Labrador size I would say a pet pig should be. So, a medium dog is okay. Normal pigs like Landrace, Tamworths and British Saddlebacks are 8 foot long and a metre wide you know! So, basically a quarter the size of a normal pig, or less. Some normal pigs are huge. Some of my one year old boars if you put them next to them, you would be astonished at the size difference. Now, over twelve years we have decreased the size of the pig. So, they are getting smaller and smaller. That’s due to the decrease in protein, so meat pigs are weaner, grower, and finisher. They increase the protein as they go, but we keep ours on a 12% protein, 15% fibre. So, that I contributing possibly to the size difference, and then of course selective breeding.

K: So what goes into the breeding in terms of parent selection and things?

P: Well size is ultimately the main thing, You look at size and you look at markings. If you put two black pigs together, you’re going to get an all-black litter, so what I do is have a black boar and a coloured mum, maybe ginger and white. People like to have different colours, maybe spotty, but then people like black so it depends on the customer. So, if we mix it up a bit then hopefully, we get a nice mixture of a litter. Then, obviously, personality as well. I’m not going to breed from Maggie anymore, she has had 11 litters and she’s a little bigger than other pigs. So, now I’m looking at the younger pigs who are smaller and ginger. There’s shapes involved, they should have like a streamlined shape and straight back, good bum shape. Ours are quite lean because of the diet they are on, and they do move around quite a bit. I mean, when they get older they do gain a bit of weight between 2 and 5, maybe 6, they are kind of at their prime.

K: Are they sold before they are born and marked to a buyer?

P: It used to be like that but I'm a bit behind at the moment. Ideally I like to sell them during pregnancy and then they go at 8 weeks to customers. I’m not at that point at the moment, I've slacked behind.

K: So customers don’t chose their pig?

P: Some customers already know exactly what they want. They’ve got their CPH number, they’ve got the land, they’ve been looking and know what they want, boys or girls. It’s brilliant when those kind of customers come and I know exactly what I’ve got. Some pigs are just like “i want a pig”. So, we start from scratch with them, they do a pig keeping course, talk about males and females... males need to be castrated, do you want one of each? What are you looking for? Some just want one because they have other animals. Some want two. I just sold four to a lady who has got a smallholding and she is getting several animals. I’ve sold five to people before, three, two, one. It depends on the customer but I normally suggest a minimum of two.

K: is there any trouble in meeting the demand?

P: no at the moment, no.

K: Do you castrate the males before they go?

P: My vets do, yeah. I’ve done all my 2021 stock. I’ve actually got some going on Friday. I like to do it when the customers are paying because it costs me a lot of money to pay out for the castrations. But it is something that needs to be done before a certain age because then they start to get hormonal and stuff when they get to that maturity, so.... I will be doing the 2022 stock this friday and next so everyone who needs to be castrated is castrated.

K: how many pigs do you breed from at the moment?

P: About 3. We did 3 litters this year.

K: You mentioned you were going to stop breeding from one particular pig, what happens to them once they stop breeding?

P: Oh, she will stay. She’s a very popular pig here so she will stay with us here. I’ll keep her, she is one of my favorites. She will stay here, play with the customers, and chill out.

K: do you ever have unexpected babies that are more than you planned for?

P: No

K: What do you look for in owners, are they vetted in any way?

P: Er, no. They need to have a garden, obviously. They need to have permission from their landlord if they don’t own it. You have to be over 21 years old. We have a sale of pigs policy which they have to read and agree to. They have to do the pig keeping course.

K: What goes into the pig keeping course?

P: it’s two hours, first hour is husbandry and practically feeding, grooming, fences, posts, anatomy, what you need to do daily, weekly, monthly and annually. Then there is the legality side of things, records, licences, medical records, vaccination records, holding records, all the DEFRA things on what you can and can’t do. Just general paperwork side of keeping livestock. Just so they understand all these things like walking licenses and where they should keep their records and things and when they should update them.

K: and if we talk about your relationship with the pigs you have, some you’ve had for years, do you develop a bond with them over time?

P: Yeah of course, they know me.

K: How would you describe your relationship?

P: Just when you talk to them, you call them and they come to you, you talk to them and they look at you, they respond back and talk back to you. They give you a little look. Rosa I had a special relationship with, she really was a beautiful pig. She obviously grew up with us at home as a piglet, so she wouldn’t respond to other staff when she started to get ill, but when I went over there she would get up and come over. I kinda brought her up so she knows me well. I also have Jelly, who I bottle-fed when he was one week old. He made a special sound, he would always come to me and never go to my daughter. If he was put on her lap he would make a special grunting sound and come running back to me. So, whenever I see him I just call him and he comes running.

K: So you have an emotional bond with some of them?

P: Yeah. Bless him he is such a sweet pig.

K: Do you think having pet pigs changes peoples perceptions about them as animals?

P: Yeah, I think a lot of people think they are just these muddy things than run about in a field. You know, then when they come here they are are like really friendly and really nice, then they realise that that’s what they want to have.

K: a lot of the owners I have spoke to have family and friends who don't really understand why they would want a pig as a pet, they can make bacon jokes and things like that.

P: Yeah, course they do. Everyone loves to make jokes. But as I say, once they come here, they are kind of converted.

K: Hard not to! Are there any common health issues you get, either in piglets or older pigs?

P: Not really. They just plod along. Unless they get sick, a few times I've had mums with slight farrowing fever, feeling sick and high temperature when giving birth. Once Scarlett and Jack had a stomach infection and had to have antibiotics. A couple of times the boys have fought and when they have tusks, they have to get stitches. Other than that, in all the years we haven’t really had any sickness. They are hardy.

K: Do owners call back about things for advice in general?

P: Um, a few times when they’ve dropped weight and lost condition and they’re feeling a bit miserable. I suggest they worm them again. A lot of those customers actually had dogs, I said that what you have to understand is your dogs are going out and bringing in stuff that is parasitical, so you need to worm the pigs more often. When they did that, the pigs' moods changed, and their health condition changed and they were happier.

K: Is there anything else you would like to add about pigs as pets and emotional connections you can build with them?

P: I just think they make great pets, like I say, easy to manage but very pretty. Our ones are, anyway. They are very therapeutic, they are relaxed and warm when you touch them. They are also robust as well. They are so solid. They are heavy and strong animals. You shouldn’t underestimate them. You can just talk to them, you know? Sometimes a raised voice is enough, but you have to ask a pig. It’s not an animal that just obeys, like a dog.

K: So you have to build up a communication with them?

P: Yeah, you have to ask them. They may say no. They are very food oriented so you’ve got to motivate them with food.

K: When they are born and before they are homed, what is the process of getting them ready to become a pet?

P: Most of it is done by the mum really. The first four weeks you look after the mum as she looks after the piglets. You just feed the mum and she feeds the piglets. Two meals a day for the first five weeks then up it, as from about three weeks they start to nibble on mum’s food and she starts getting annoyed, so you need to make sure there is enough for mum and babies. Enough water. Also, If you give mum like an hour away from the piglets, so we have split pens where you can give mum some rest. They get very tired, they are feeding throughout the night and through the day. So, they er get a bit annoyed. About five to six weeks they start to push the piglets away. Then you know she has had enough, she starts pushing and throwing them away because you imagine, they are jumping on her and can be quite aggressive and greedy. At seven weeks the mum is ready to move away, she has started to lose a bit of weight and she has had enough. Then, you leave them for a week to adjust without their mum. You can’t have them lose their mum and their home and their family in one go, it’s not good. So, once they have had that week to adjust we take them for castration and send them to their new homes if they are ready to go.

K: And they get socialised by people coming to visit?

P: Yeah, they get socialised here from two weeks old. They have two weeks with their mum and after that, they are definitely going to survive. Before that, if they don’t get the right amount of milk, they might not make it at all. They could also be squashed as well. You’ve got squashing. Bullying too, so the bigger pigs might take milk from the runts of the litter. They get less and less and you need to bottle feed them, you don’t want that to happen. So, you just... but you can’t really get too involved because they need to take the milk they need to take. You just need to keep an eye everyone is getting enough milk, that it’s not too cold, not too hot. If it’s to cold, they shiver and use all their energy up. If it’s too hot, they get lethargic and can get dehydrated, sun burnt. A lot of piglets don’t know not to sit in the sun so you have you give them suncream and plenty of water. But they won’t really start drinking until they are three or four weeks, but as long as the water is there. Then obviously, you’ve got drowning risk so you have to make sure they won’t drown. But the mum pretty much does all the work, then you just make sure the mum is ok, she isn’t too hot and hasn’t got mastitis. May had that recently and we had to call the vet out. Piglets were getting a lot of diarrhea, the mom was looking up well and started to be sick. That was not a good sign so we called the vet and he said that she had a bit of a temperature and he gave her antibiotics for mastitis. Then a week later she was OK, she was fine, the diarrhea stopped. She was healthy and they were healthy, so, just look after the mum and they will look after their piglets. If the mom isn't looking after the piglets that is a big problem. I have had that before with pigs that are too young, and they don't know that they need to feed them all the time. She just kept wandering off so we eventually had to pen her in the house, to force her as she couldn't get away from the piglets. Then once the milk was being given more regularly to the piglets she did understand her job. That's why they should really be over two years old before they have piglets.

K: is that something you actively think about when you are selecting who to breed?

P: always. It has happened accidentally before. Boars have got out and got in with pigs, which is not good. It does happen though. But you do have to try to keep the boys away from the girls.

K: is squashing a big issue for you?

P: it's an issue for all pig farmers. It happens a lot. So, you can’t have too much straw in the bed. You can have farrowing crates that have like a banner around the pen, then they are stuck behind the mum. We did actually have one that got squashed, but I revived it. Miraculously, it survived. Luckily we found it and I took it out, put it in a box and give it some goats milk. Did that for a day or so to let it get its temperature back, I've got heat pads and stuff. Eventually we put it back in and thank God it went back with its mum, otherwise I would have to bottle feed him which I didn't want to do. But yeah they sometimes can get squashed, sometimes they are weak or a runt and they won’t make it. Sometimes it's better to leave it than try and battle it, because they could grow up with problems. I've got a friend who did that, she took one, and now he has problems for his whole life. I did say that to her, you will have vet bills and problems. He's got this falling Down syndrome and arthritis. He has got problems in his mobility, and I warned her. He wasn't meant to make it, but she saved him. and she loves him.