Interview with Ben (pseudonym) farmed animal sanctuary founder

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Researcher: [K]

K: Can you tell me how your organisation became involved in rescuing pigs?

P: So, I'm obviously the founder of [rescue name] and 25 years ago we had a deliberate shift from domestic animals to farm animals, so that’s where my heart always was. So, although it was quicker and easier to turn round domestic animals, being young or old – oh, and horses... there just wasn’t the places for the *occasional* [participants emphasis] farm animal that needed rescue, it wasn’t like it is today, where every day you’re asked to take farm animals. In fact, I would be looking for these animals way back then to help. So, that’s really how [rescue name] has morphed into a farm animal sanctuary and rescue center.

K: Ok, so back then it was more dogs and cats?

P: Yeah, that’s how it all started just with domesticated animals, a big crew of horses. Even when I was very young, I was taking in horses from yards that people were going to shoot. So, even when I was late teens I had 11 horses or something. I’ve always rescued animals my whole life, there’s ever been a part when I haven’t helped animals, so I'm 53 now. My first pig residence arrived 25 years ago, her name was [Harriet]. So, about 25 years ago that’s when the farm animals started to arrive.

K: I’d like to know a bit more about that shift actually, so why did [Harriet] come to you in the first place?

P: [Harriet] was a pet pig, and a lone pet pig so she’d never had any company. She was about middle-aged, probably about 8 years old, I think. People were just bored with her. They had not told me that they had attempted to breed her and I'm not sure if she had some babies at some point, but when she arrives I had no idea she was carrying young, and she went on to have 8 or 10 babies. So, it was a bit of a shock to go from one little pet piggy, who was a very naughty pig... let me tell you what she used to do! We never lived on site at the time, she used to break out of our center, go to the local pub, she’d actually go inside the village pub and she’d ransack people’s tables to eat their lunches! She was very naughty, that’s why we all remember her.

K: Very memorable! Can you tell me how [rescue name] adapted to taking farm animals in, if it was purpose built for the domestic animals?

P: So, thankfully we had the space for horses. Each field had a shelter, we had lots of stables and the infrastructure to take in rescues horses. Just slowly, we began to use stables for newly arrived pigs and then we’d start to give over a percentage of the meadows to those animals. Pigs, they’re very good at ruining the land. They shouldn’t be contained the way we contain them, it’s not their fault. We designated bits of the old site – we now have a second sanctuary – so we designated certain areas that would be static areas for pigs to stay on. We found they needed a little more infrastructure than the horses did, we could rotate the grazing with the horses but we couldn’t do that with the pigs. So that’s how we came up with the husbandry. We do it quite different now, the pigs all come in for winter. We’ve got about... I should know this, I’ve just got back from a weeks’ holiday. We lost [Annie] yesterday, one of our pigs, who was 20 years old. I think we have about 160 now. We’ve had a few intakes and we have a couple youngsters, we don’t usually get youngsters, but we just got 2 tiny babies as well. So, now, pretty much 80% of our pigs come in for the winter and we have barns, they have concrete yards, so they have outdoor areas, but they have lovely big barns with straw to come in. So, we bring them off the fields to give them a bit of time to maybe get a bit of growth of grass and things, so, when they go back in the spring it’s like something new. So, we do it slightly different now. Whereas, in the past we tended to keep the animals in their enclosures all year.

K: And did you hire any new people to specifically help with the farm animals?

P: No, so really, the hiring of staff has only come on our new site. We’ve had that for 9 years, when we started to employ people. It would basically be something we threw together with our professional lives and social lives. It’s always been there. I suppose it’s like parents, you know, people have children and their time was full up, then they have a child, then they make time for that child. I think that’s really just … I can’t really remember if I'm honest … there was never a decision made that ‘we will do this today’, but definitely when we moved to the new site, our pig numbers started to increase rapidly so that’s when we needed a team of people really, as caregivers, because obviously we couldn’t do it all anymore.

K: And what did you know about pigs before that first one came in?

P: I knew nothing. I literally knew nothing about pigs. When we got [Harriet], I know there’s that saying where you don’t know head from tail of an animal, but that’s very true! I knew the front end has got teeth and the back end has a tail. I knew nothing, it was a case of learning as you went along, sometimes to the detriment of animals. Even back then, we’re talking 25 years ago, it hasn’t really moved on much if I'm honest when it comes to pigs. Vets knew how to breed pigs, fatten pigs, and kill pigs. There was very little in between. Actually, 2020 proved that to me, that apart from some improvements in medication, so for instance you can get Metacam made for pigs now, instead of juggling the strengths of Metacam for other animals, or other pain relief or anti-inflammitories. Actually, virtually nothing else has moved on. I’ve had some really complicated cases in 2020 and, they couldn’t be solved. If they had been dogs, there would have been routine operations and we would have saved those animals’ lives, but because they were pigs, we couldn’t get a practice to do these operations on the pigs. It’s disgraceful.

K: what kind of problems did they have?

P: We experienced our first pyometra, which, if you have pyometra in a dog, they’re rushed in. Basically, it’s a build up of poison or infection in their uterine horns. Now, I mean I remember losing dogs do it 30 years ago, but now it would be UNHEARD OF to lose a dog to pyometra. Unfortunately, we have an aging community of pigs. It’s very, very, very new you’d spay female pigs. So, our aging pigs were not the tiny pigs that we could have spayed, so we’re now experienced in all sorts of ovarian cancers, tumors in places that in dogs would be taken away, so you don’t experience that. We also had a perotonitis in a pig … I could look up the details, but we had some really complicated cases where we asked for referrals. Actually, 2020 was the year of not only lockdowns and coronavirus, so people weren’t doing what they normally do, but there was the outbreak of African Swine Fever, so, people were even more like “we’re not touching pigs!” which was really, really sad. I got a vet who works at our practice to do a bit of a botched operation on a pig, basically, she had bits hanging out of her vulva and he had no idea what it was. We were like “that cannot stay, that’s going to get infected and it’s going to kill her, she needs to be operated on!”, but because of pigs and anesthetics... I mean this is why I say it really hasn’t moved on when it comes to pigs, vets are very much like “We don’t want to do anything. We will put them to sleep.” Thankfully, in 2013, I had a stroke of luck where I managed to get an amazing vet! Let me tell you, the man is actually a super vet. He actually fixed a broken leg of one of my pigs, who was pregnant at the time, [Treacle]. He never gave her anesthetic, he gave her epideural, he gave her pain relief because he didn’t want to kill her unborn. So, he was amazing. I do use that, it’s a bit of muscle I now have to say “actually, do you want to be like the supervet!?”. I have been able to twist a few of their arms to do some things, almost experimental, but it’s saved the piggies lives. To me, that’s the most important thing, come on! A pig is not an alien, she’s going to have pretty much the same anatomy as dogs. I understand things are complicated – pain reliefs, anesthetic, whatever, but come on, let’s try.

K: So the treatments are kind of driven by you, would you say?

P: Oh, this is absolutely... thankfully two things have happened to me in my life. One is I'm a vegan, which obviously, you understand is justice for animals. Second, I'm an animal rights vegan, so if I can do something for a dog, I'm going to do something for a piggy. When my [Treacle] broke her leg, I had a job away from the centre, I got the phone call to say [Treacle] had broken her leg. There was a vet, a farm vet, on site who examined her, no pain relief, knowing her leg was broken, said “she needs to be killed, now”. I said, well we wouldn’t kill a horse who broke their leg, we have had several horses with broken bones, we don’t kill them. We use unorthodox treatment that’s becoming more and more popular, but we persevere. I said, “we’re not killing the piggy.” Even now, that vet wants to dispute that he actually said “kill the pig”, and I will say to him, well two things. He never administrated any pain relief to a creature that had broken a bone, could you imagine this? You never offered anything alternative to putting them to sleep, so what are you disputing? I don’t understand. So there is a bit of backlash now, because they know people are doing things. I found out recently, I was very pleased to hear that some vets, a small percentage, are sterilizing small female pigs now in the U.K. So, this is really good news because you’re not going to be faced with those later illnesses that we were faced with in 2020 that we probably still are faced with now, so yeah. Hopefully, it is down to you being very stubborn, if you stick your heels in and say no. Same with the horses, I won't have a horse killed if they have a broken leg. I’m not going to do it. We absolutely do have a euthanasia policy for all our animals, but I feel that if there is a way forward, we will try it first.

K: Yeah.

P: Death is pretty final, isn’t it? Death is your last option because you can’t try anything else after death. If you’ve tried everything and nothing has worked, I understand you’re not going to have creatures suffer under our watch, so we will put to sleep. But, we want to know that we’ve tried everything first. That for me is the most important thing.

K: And what happened to [Treacle]?

P: So, [Treacle]. Three days after having, you know those external fixators, do you know what they are? If this is the leg [gestures to arm], say the break is here, you basically screw into the bone above and below, then you have external rods which support the leg and keep the bone in place, it’s incredible. It’s like a scaffolding outside the leg. In domestic animals, dogs and cats, they’re commonplace. You’d keep the cat or dog caged in your house because of infection. It wasn’t that easy with [Treacle] [laughs]. External fixators stay on the leg for about twelve weeks. Now, big problem, I wouldn’t want to tell this to many people, but big problem is infection. She is a pig, she wants to do the things that pigs do, so, for twelve weeks we had to keep her in a really, really spotlessly clean environment. Twelve weeks is a very long time for a little animal to not be able to do what she wanted to do, we tried to do some things to give her some enrichment, but each time infection broke out in the leg. Remember also, she has eleven newborns that are drinking milk, and each little bottom peeing and pooing, she would be cleaning them and that would be attached to her leg, so it wasn’t easy. We got through it and she still lives with her lovely family because that’s something we don’t agree with in domestic pigs, we don’t agree with seperating them from their family, they’re very attached. They’re not the same as wild boar, we shouldn’t confuse them with wild boar, they are very, very family orientated and they want to live with their families. So, she still lives with the group of pigs she came in with, there was a few others, and she lives with her babies. They’ve all stayed together.

K: That’s lovely.

P: Yes we’re very happy with [Treacle]’s story.

K: So do they chose their own families at [rescue name]?

P: Yeah, so [Treacle] and her family are in our main herd, where there’s about 110. So they have a field during the good months, then they come into a barn and several other buildings and a yard. [Treacle] will always, always be found in the straw with her family. If it’s a warm day, she might be there with five or six of them. If it’s a cold day, they will all be there to generate that heat!

K: So there’s no individual pens in the main field, they are all out together?

P: Yeah, so how it works is, we have a static herd of pigs, a main herd. Then, we have several other areas for what we call our delicate pigs, if you’re disabled, if you’ve got any dietary or medical needs, if you’re very young, you might be in that group. We have several different areas for those pigs. If you’re in the main herd, if you’re happy to, you would be moved into an older piggy area. You generally come out with your bonds, but you might be a loner. Generally, you would always move with your family, as you get older your family will move with you. Then, after some introductions, which is not easy, you get the next crew of pigs in the main herd. It’s pretty static, but we will pick those out that need a little bit more help.

K: You must be really blessed with space that allows you to do that.

P: Yeah, since moving to the new site the horse numbers have decreased, so we do a lot more matching home to home. The difference for pigs, unlike any other animal at our centre, we never, ever, they do not leave our centre. So other animals; sheep, goats, chickens, horses, cattle, dogs cats, ducks, pigeons all leave our centre for new homes. The pigs do not. So, we’ve kind of tried to create the areas we need for the infrastructure always because we’re always gonna have that number of pigs, whereas, cows may fluctuate, horses may fluctuate because of homing them. It doesn’t with pigs, so, we have those areas set aside for just pigs.

K: And what led to the decision not to rehome pigs in particular?

P: Only one decision. That’s because, as a rescue centre, unlike a breeder, you should always, whatever animal you are rehoming, you should offer full back up to. With pigs, this is very difficult, because if you imagine, in our static herd of 100, if someone arrived and said they’ll take ten pigs and we take those ten out of the static herd. It would be a family group, we wouldn’t just randomly pick ten pigs out. Let’s just say we took [Treacle]’s family out, for instance, and rehomed them. There would be no way for us to offer full backup. If overnight, the person couldn’t take those ten pigs, you couldn’t drop them back into the main herd. The introduction back takes a long time, it’s taken as long as two years before. The whole decision on not rehoming pigs is that we cannot offer rescue backup. What we now do if people come to us wanting pigs, they will get pigs before they enter the farm, so pigs that might be on a waiting list from another farm. But we will make it clear to them that those pigs are not coming from us, so although we can support those people if they have any problems, we cannot take them back. So, we may be able to take them in, just not immediately.

K: And why is that reintroduction phase so difficult?

P: I don’t know the science. I would imagine it has something to do with being territorial. Secondly, pigs are descended from wild boar, so, maybe there is that influence. It’s not an influence in their family groups, but they may see it as “this is our area”. People don’t realise, pigs do kill other pigs. There’s no doubt about it. I know lots of other centres who haven’t listened to advice, and they’ve had pigs so terribly injured that they’ve died as a result of their injuries. So, it’t not because of resources because I know lots of centres that have much more space per pig than we do, but you still can’t introduce them. Actually, you have to get a pretty good match. I tell you what we do, I've tried to loan this kind of idea to other centres because it’s tried and tested, it works. We never, ever do a single introduction. We never take one pig and say “Right mate, you’re in the herd of 100 today!”. What we generally do, let’s say we got one young pig, he would be in a yard with a barn, sleeping in the spaces other pigs have slept in, so he’d get to smell their smells. Then, we would bring a few kind of, nicer, more gentle ones from the main herd. They would be in the yard next door. Slowly but surely, I mean this can take all year, the best part of spring and summer and autumn, we will build that little family up, maybe to 10 or 12. The last group I think we did 17, we took 6 newbies in and built the group up to 17 and put them back out. That seems to work, that seems to be the only way we can get an introduction. We don’t have a magic wand, I can’t say to people “this will take you two weeks”, there’s no magic wand, it’s all chemistry. I had a group, with [Edna], who lives in our main field. They are hugely territorial, huge, huge bullies. They’re real matriarchs. You tend to find that the girls are the troublemakers, and the males, maybe because they’re neutered, are the peacekeepers. So, because her family is a big group of girls, they’re really the ones who want to kick the shit out of everyone! Generally, even when we let the 17 in, [Enda]’s family will be excluded, we kind of have a bit of a build up, a bit of a buffer, before the bullies are out! But, that’s because we know our pigs so well, you know, we know the kick-arse ones or the ones who won’t settle till they’ve chased them all round the fields. We do have a smaller introduction zone in the main paddock too, so the pigs go into an area first, which is an area where all the other pigs sleep in, but then they’re shut out. So they can smell, roll about and we will check and see who’s fighting along the fence. Eventually when it dies down, it never completely disappears, but when it’s died down, we then start the introduction in the field together.

K: So it’s a bit of trial and error?

P: Definitely yeah, if I go on too much please stop me, I'm a talker!

K: No, no worries I want you to talk!

P: Good good good.

K: All your males are neutered?

P: All males are neutered, about nine years ago we took on a new policy, where we wouldn’t take uneautered males on site now. There’s always going to be an exception, so at the moment, we’ve got these two babies. Brother and sister. The little boy isn’t neutered, but he’s about the size of a cocker spaniel. Um, so, what we found is when we brought unneutered males on site, we’d have a lot of trouble with our females. So, our females would damage a lot of the infrastructure, lift a lot of the fencing to try and find the boys. Also the boys are very highly strung, so they’re very determined to get to the females too. Actually, we had a big accident, well, I had a big accident at [rescue name] nine years ago. It resulted in me having surgery, three weeks in hospital. So, at that point it was considered a welfare issue for our animals and the team. So, we really want entire males to have been neutered about twelve weeks before you come on the site. Of course, that’s not going to happen if you’re a stray pig. If you’re a stray male, and someone is going to shoot you and you can’t go anywhere else, we’re going to take you. We’re not going to jepordise their lives. But as a policy, we do try to make sure they are neutered. We don’t mind paying the costs if people can’t afford it, you know, we have a free neutering service for pigs anyway. If people have pigs we will neuter them free of charge, so it’s not a cost issue for us. It’s absolutely, the harmony of the centre and the health and safety of the team and the pigs.

K: Interesting. Can you tell me about the day to day caring of the pigs from the morning till the end of the day?

P: Yeah, we work with the designated farm team, so, it’s always the same people who work look after the farm animals. So, we have a farm team, a horse team, a cat team, a dog team and treatment and veterinary team. In the farm team we have three team leaders across the week, so, three paid farm people. Everyone under that is a volunteer. So, we start with what we call ward round in the morning. Ward round is not like, go and pass your eye around the field, a ward round is when you go and you make sure every one in your care is fully functioning. You can’t just walk into a field and see 100 pigs sleeping and go ‘oh yes, there’s 100 pigs’, you have to go wake up 100 pigs. Check they can get up, check they can do what they want. From ward round, there is walk round. Walk round is in their enclosures and barns to make sure there's no hazards, everything is working properly, like taps and waters haven't been broken overnight by the piggies. So ward round, then walk round, then husbandry. Generally their first meal is on the dot, 10:30 every day, that’s when they get their big meal. We substitute our pigs feed with hay, so they get a lot of hay, especially in the winter he wave big rounds of hay. That’s not only something they can keep eating all day, so, when they’re out they can root all the time. It’s also just interesting for them. The team have to make sure that after breakfast and when all the waters are done, they check enrichment. So, they check the hay is there and stuff. These things are done mechanically by tractors, so it’s a bit of team building there too because everyone needs a driver. Then, from there, I'm only talking about this time of year, other times of year it is very different. Then, it’s the cleaning of the yards, so, everything has to be made beautiful and clean. Then you’re looking at their bedrooms, looking at whether they need more substrate or whatever, and ensuring that their mineral licks, salt licks, everything they need, basically in their hotel room, is there for them. Of course, then the team get time to love them, they do a secondary health check too. For me, the most crucial time is breakfast, when every pig is up eating their concentrates because you can see how well their mouths are working. With older pigs you get a lot of mouth issues. Dentistry work is not easy on piggies, in fact, in 2020 we had three complicated mouth issues that resulted in tumours, but all three piggies died under anaesthetic. We lost all three to an anaesthetic. Just for mouth issues. There would have been serious problems in the end, because it was the start of tumours and stuff. If it were a dog, you wouldn’t have anything to worry about. We were up against it. Anyway, geneally the team’s day finishes when it’s dark, we don’t prelong the day by floodlights because most of the animals are ready to go to bed and they snuggle down for the night. Generally, that’s what we do in the winter. When it’s summer, when it’s lighter at 10 o’clock at night, it might seem like it’s easier but it’s not, the rresidents are up later and they drink more water, so I think it’s harder. Then, of course, on top of that, you’ve got other things. Today, for instance, we had the vet here for three piggies. Two with foot issues, one with a tusk issue, so then you’ve got to fit that in, because those pigs often have to be segregated. You’ve got to prepare the treatment areas to bring the pigs out from their groups, to get them settled. Then there’s behind the scenes, ordering food and substrates and so on. That’s a basic day. There may be a piggy rescue in there somewhere.

K: Yeah. What does their feed consist of?

P: Every day they get concentrate, so they get these things called sow rolls, like a commercial, it would be like a doog food basically. It’s got everything they need. We kind of developed a bit of an action plan over the years, so, in the early days, we would lose our big, heavy pigs at around about 10, and I think we used to lose them about 10 because we were killing them with kindness. We were overfeeding them concentrate. Now, we realise the hidden secret weapon is hay. They can eat like horses, eat as much as they want and there’s no calorific, kind of, hidden side to it. It’s like us eating celery, we can sit there and eat celery all day and not 1 calorie will be left because you’re using those calories to eat it. I think, what we’ve found is that hay has become a really good substitute, not just for giving them... I suppose it’s like in winter, I hate this term, but it’s like a boredom breaker. You know, they don’t have the field to turn over, waiting for the acorns to drop and so on, and who knows what you’re going to find in these bales of hay. Sometimes, they get so excited, I once saw them find a bee's nest in one, and they were all so excited! So you never know, and that for me, I suppose what I'm trying to say is that once, we would fill those boredom times with more concentrates, which are more fat, so we would see our pigs going when they were perfectly healthy up top, but their little legs... sorry let me just get rid of this [disruption from phone]….so we would see those piggies go at about 10 because their bodies would be so fat that their little legs could not deal with their body weight. Now we do keep those same kind of pigs, those kind of industrial, big heavy pigs, we keep them to 15 now. So, we got an extra 5 years on it. Which is really, really wonderful. So it’s really important to us that they’re not just fed a load of concentrates. Twice a week, we do get donated the most mega amount of fresh produce and bread and cakes, so it’s treat day from Sainsbury’s, so that’s two days a week. The fresh produce, you could never have enough of, from a couple of local farms. Some cider farms might have pears and apples and they bring them in, then we’ve got a couple of Waitrose’s that give us their green veg, we’ve got one garden centre too. So, each day there’s the concentrates, the hay, and sometimes treat time. It’s not all doughnuts, that’s maybe twice a week.

K: So, when did you introduce the hay?

P: When we came to the new site, so about 10 years ago, it must be 10 years. They always used to have the equivalent of a hay net, like the size of what a horse would have, but now they have these massive rounds, I think they weigh a tonne. It’s not only great for them to nibble on, but they carry it back to their bedrooms, they move it about, it can be quite social... its’s like us meeting in a bar. They all sit around and spread it round, I suppose it’s great for their emotional wellbeing as well as dietary. It would have been about 10 years ago, and from that, the consequence definitely is that our pigs are living 5 years longer.

K: Are they showing any other health benefits?

P: The opposite, I think! So, [Annie] who just went, she was a kune-kune cross, more of a pet breed, but what I feel like, you extend their lives, you lose one ailment, where they wouldn’t have lived as long, and all of a sudden all the unneutered females start having loads of womb issues. [Polly] that went... in fact it was terrible, we lost three of our old girls in one day. Three of our darling old girls put to sleep in one day. Actually, [Annie], she was 15 and had lived in my house with me, she was an incredible girl. She had a stomach tumour, no, I forgot where it was, but basically, if she had been a spayed female dog, she wouldn’t have had the area to have had this tumour but she still had her womb and everything. She had a 20 kilo tumour. 20 kilo tumour. So, basically, we could not get it removed. By the time it arrived, by the time we realised she had this tumour, it started to create all sort of problems. We’ve got another complicated one at the moment as well, we just took this piggy in about three months ago. An 8-year-old female, and she must have had, well, this is what the vet thinks, they’re a bit baffled, but they think she had a hernia that was filled with fluid for a long time, basically stretched her belly, and some how was injured and lost the fluid. Now, we’ve got this piggy. She basically needs a tummy tuck. She’s got all of this tummy that’s on the floor, she treads on it with her feet, her little hooves actually slice and cut open her belly. At the moment, she’s got this amazing contraption that the team have made, like a bit belt with velcro, so it holds her tummy up and velcroed over the top, but long term she needs to have a tummy tuck. You can’t believe the lengths I’ve gone to get this piggy a tummy tuck, but, I'm getting there! Fingers crossed we just get the anaesthetic regime right for her. Actually, she was 8 years old when she got here, she’s been here 3 months, she’s lived 8 years without a piggy, but she’s got those 2 little babies that have just arrived. So, [Carrie]’s got them, although she’s been 8 years without a piggy, and of course we can’t put her with any big piggies because of her tummy problems, but she snuggles up with these two babies every night, so that’s worked out well.

K: Yeah, I was going to ask what you do about approaching vets to solve these issues. Do you use one vet or a variety?

P: You have to use a variety of vets, you have to have your cards very close to your chest. I believe in being honest with the vets, so quite often I'll say , if I'm not getting my own way, I mean... It’s not because I want a tummy tuck, it’s because this little creature wants a tummy tuck! So, I will, I'll be very honest with them and say “well, I'm going to have to take this into my own hands”. I will approach veterinary colleges myself, so Bristol, RVC and others, as I did with [the vet], I contacted him and it worked out in our best interests. There are some vets, that I feel... they’re changing, they’re listening, they want to learn, but they’re still 95% old school. Even with old vets, they’re still 95% you know... “she’s a piggy, she’s not worth the hassle... I don’t know and I don’t want to learn”. I will quite often say to them, we’re experiencing with pigs at the moment, what we were experiencing with rabbits ten years ago. People would be saying “but you can get a rabbit for 3 quid in the local paper, why do you want to spend £250 on an operation?”. For some reason, the piggy thing is very slow. When you think about birds, when we have a problem with a chicken... in monetary terms, I hate talking like this because obviously I'm an animal rights vegan. A chicken in monetary terms is worth nothing when her little life is finished, so, when we get these poor little egg layers, we quite often have them spayed now. That’s £600 a bird. You can get a vet to spay a chicken. Before the spaying took off, you could get a vet to implant them. Even recently when one of our vets was sterilizing a chicken, he was saying he was sterilizing a budgie! But for some reason with pigs, it just haven’t moved. They’ve learnt how to grow them faster, to get them fatter, to be killed. They’ve brought about more terrible ways of killing them, you know, the gassing, which was brought in by, I think, the American Veterinary Board, but nothing really for the welfare of an individual pig has moved on. You have to have many vets up your sleeve. Quite often, not a piggy vet. There’s not really such a thing, but a farm vet. I’ve gone to great lengths now, I've got a building registered at [rescue name] as a veterinary practice, so we’ve got a full operational veterinary practice. I’m bringing vets in who want to experiment, who want to try and help animals, they’re really welfare driven. At the moment, I've got about 3 vets who are very, very interested in 2 complicated pig cases I've got at [rescue name]. Fingers crossed, [Carrie] being one of them, we will get them sorted out.

K: Are they from colleges these vets?

P: They’re practicing, these vets, but what they’ve done is they’ve gone out into the big wide world, gone into private practices and realised private practices, especially now, is just gonna milk the client because pretty much everyone is ensured, and they don’t see it as an immoral thing anymore. They see it as “well they’re not paying for it, they’re ensured”. Vets are becoming more and more disillusioned, and I think the other thing is, they realise that if you look across the world, we always think we’re the first nation and then there’s the developing world. Well, you can go to the developing world, India have better welfare laws than we do. They have more problem-solving vets than we do. I’m sure you’ve seen online there’s been elephants that have trodden on landmines and had their feet blown off and they’ve been given prosthetic feet. I mean, here, you just wouldn’t get a vet doing that. They’d make them into elephant burgers, elephants are just a funny shaped lump of meat! This is what you’re up against, there are this very small amount of vets that are now working in the welfare side of things and their minds are a little bit different. A woman who comes here, a vet, I can talk to her. I don’t have to tell her what the animal is first, I'll tell her the problem, she’ll talk to other vets and come back to me. So yeah, that’s the answer to the vet one. It’s a bit long winded. Never, ever burn bridges. Never burn bridges. It’s horses for courses, some vets might be useless looking at a piggy with a cancerous growth, but maybe the kindest vet when it comes to neutering those little boy piggies, so, never burn bridges. Buy them a bottle of prosecco at Christmas!

K: [laughs]. Don’t feel like you have to stop talking, it’s interesting to hear what you have to say.

P: Yes of course.

K: If we talk about the relationships humans and pigs have at the sanctuary, thinking staff, yourself and volunteers. Firstly, how would you describe a pig to someone who has never met one?

P: Firstly, I always say to people they’ve got completely the wrong end of the stick when it comes to pigs. The first thing people will tell you is how dirty pigs are. It's the first thing. I can honestly say, unless I've had a pig who’s off her legs, we have never had a poo inside our barns. They all go outside. They all go. It’s almost like a little social gathering, they all have their pees and poos somewhere else. In my years of animal rescue, I've been in filthy homes and they belong to human beings, absolutely filthy. Pigs are the other end of the spectrum to what people think they are. I think, pretty much now people have got a good idea now that pigs are intelligent. You only have to stand one side of the gate to watch pigs and watch what they’re doing. They're multitasking. They might be interested in you but they're also alert to what’s going on around them, it might be feed time and they’re clocking everyone. For me, pigs are loveable, they’re always very, very interested in humans. One thing I find shocking is, quite often, when I go pick up a pig from a farm that’s had terrible interactions with humans, they still have something for you. It doesn’t matter what’s gone on. They’re very knowing pigs, very knowing. Maybe that is their intelligence level, that they’re very knowing., but they’re the complete opposite.. Actually I think most animals are the complete opposite of what we think. We say bird brain, if you know birds, there’s no such thing as bird brain. That’s the thing with pigs. People think they’re dirty. Dirty!? Show me a dirty pig. A clever pig will go lay in the wallow, get all that lovely mud all over and as it dries and cracks off, it takes all of those parasites away. What do we do if we’ve got headlice? Not that I'm going to get headlice... but we go see a doctor, a pharmacist, pour all these chemicals over our heads, and we still haven’t got rid of headlice! Pigs just know the score. Actually, an interesting thing I found out recently - I spoke with an animal expert from Bristol, an incredible woman, a really incredible young woman, full of incredible knowledge. What she said just blew me away, she said pigs are the only other mammal, to humans, that have an intricate language that includes lullabies that they sing to their children. When you think, pigs amount to a bacon sandwich, most pigs, I mean we’ve got nearly 200 and you might find another 600 in sanctuaries across the UK, but billions worldwide amount to a bacon sandwich – and they sing lullabies to their children! I thought, did I really want to know that? That’s how incredible they are. That’s the word I'd use for pigs – incredible.

K: Do you see them communicating with each other in ways that you perhaps don’t fully understand?

P: Oh yeah, so that’s why it was really interesting to have the expert from Bristol, she spoke about squeals and squeaks and oinks and what that meant. She pointed a few things out that she could clearly see going on. We have a large number of kind pf concentrated pigs at the moment, and it’s like a sea of pigs, but I can absolutely see and hear... we’ll take [Annie] who recently passed as an example. She’ll be eating in a corner and her ears will be flapping, but she’s making these incredible noises and you think, she’s making these incredible noises because she’s happy, she’s eating, but actually what she’s doing is she’s relaying that to her other family, “i’ve got the good stuff, come here!”. You see it, they start slowly moving over. What you might see if a pig scoffing her face, but it’s far more intricate than that. She’s communicating around her, and there’s times she will tell someone off for moving in too close too, she’ll tell them off. You see it all the time. You see very, very clear signs with their ears and tails, their little tails wag, you see it all the time. You would be a fool not to see it. Not to go back to it again, but my book, something I write about in the book is that animals do talk, just not with words. If you’re prepared to listen, they will talk all the time, absolutely. Quite often when I take people around [rescue name], I'll be doing tours and I'll be scratching a big old pig, saying how much I love this pig. I love it because I have a busy life and if I'm doing the tours I get maybe an hour and a half and get really into scratching the pigs, giving them a big kiss and cuddle, then all of a sudden there will be some other pigs that will be pushing you, gong “Dad! Dad! That’s quite enough on the other one, I'm here”. So, you give a good old scratch and rub to that one, then there will be another pig, “Dad! Dad!”. So, this is what is so incredible about them. If you’re prepared to look, ignorance is not bliss. Remember that. Ignorance is not bliss. This is bliss. Once you can communicate, once you can sit and look, you can think, “wow, this is mind blowing.”

K: It really is... and what were your thoughts about pigs before you actually started rescuing them yourself?

P: Yeah, definitely. Before I rescued pigs, I don’t think I had much of an opinion – of course I loved all animals, but there were some I didn’t know so I didn’t really have an opinion of them. Animals have taught me so much. You know, we can talk quite often and you mentioned this when we first started to talk, “what did you know about pigs when you started looking after them?”. Well, actually, they’re great teachers. It’s like... what did those pigs know about humans before? But actually, they’re very, very good at showing themselves. There is some difficulties with prey animals, because they want to hold on for things for much longer, like if there is a weakness, they don’t want to show it, because you’re not predator proof if you’re gonna say “hey, I'm a bit weak, a bit off colour today”. But I suppose did I not notice that at first or do they just show me more now because they rely on me as much as I do with them? It’s a two-way relationship, I think once they know they can trust you, they can say “hey dad, I don’t feel too good today, I need to come out of here”. Quite often, I'm always amazed, I may have been running around and waved to the main pig crew in the morning and an hour later one of the team has brought one of the pigs out, and two things... it shows me I've got the right team in place, they can see the little swelling between the toes or whatever and secondly, I think the pigs trust the helpers enough to say “i’m not very well today, can I come out”. So, they go out to treatment rooms. Well, they might have learnt that If they go to the treatment rooms they might get a nice big apple or a boiled egg or a nice big pineapple, but I don’t think so. I think they’re incredible, I've learnt so much from them.

K: I bet. You said that you rely on them as much as they rely on you, what did you mean by that, that you rely on them?

P: I think what happens is that, it might sound.. You know, for people who don’t understand... if you’re sensitive to the world of animals, when you go out into the big wide world, you go out shopping and you’re surrounded by murdered body parts of animals everywhere, and you go to a restaurant, even with a vegan buddy, you can still smell the pepperoni on the next table. I think we rely on the animals in rescue to support us, they’re a bit of a crutch, you know what I mean? It’s like, you’re the very few. You’re the wonders of the world. You’re the ones who have escaped through this horrendous net. Thankfully, they are, I tell everyone this, they tell a survivor's story. Hopefully, by telling their story, people make kind choices. I think that’s what I mean, when I say I rely on them. They restore my faith, they make me know they’re worth saving, they make me know that all the sleepless nights worrying about the centre, they make you know that it’s all alright.

K: So, they’re almost like ambassadors for their species in a way?

P: You’re absolutely right, this is exactly what they are. For me, the centre has only been open to the public for six years, I can absolutely tell you hundreds of stories from people who have stopped eating animals, and they’ve named the animal to me that’s done that to them. People will say, “it was meeting so and so that stopped me eating meat”. So, they actually are ambassadors because, people are outraged if you talk about Yulin festival where people eat dogs, “how can people eat dogs!? What!?”. If you were to say that to a Korean, they would say “well you eat all these animals, what is the difference?”. That’s it, what’s the difference? There is no difference. They are ambassadors, once you meet them, you can’t eat them. That’s what I always say. For me, once you see their faces, the intricate relationships they have with others, you see they have the same goals as you and I, you know, get up every morning, breathe oxygen and survive. I see that every day with this lovely lot.

K: And how long have you been vegan if you don’t mind me asking?

P: This will be my 35th year.

K: Wow.

P: I am old remember – just before my 20th birthday in my late teens, so it’s not like I was vegan as a baby! I’d been a vegetarian a little bit before that. That’s one of the great things about being vegan now, seeing the crest of the wave that veganism is at now, in all sorts of ways. The impact it will eventually have on animals is incredible. I’m so grateful to be alive. I won’t bore you with my stories, but I was once lucky enough to be on an aircraft 25 years ago and sitting in front of me was co-founder of the vegan society, Donald Watson, by pure chance. I’d never meet other vegans 25 years ago, so to have another vegan sitting on a plane in front of me... I spotted him halfway through the week of the holiday and was like “you’re the vegan!”. He was a real pessimist, a great, incredible person, but if he were alive today, he would not believe what’s happening. He would not believe how the young people of this world are taking it into their hearts, and it’s just mind-blowing. So, I think what an incredible time to be alive, for animals, not just for the planet. I mean, I'm not bothered about my health. If the doctor said to me tomorrow “you gotta eat animal products or you’ll be dead in two years”, well, I'll be dead in two years! I’m not interested in... I'm interested in animals. But it’s incredible to watch what’s happening now, it’s talked about everywhere. I remember a real pinnacle for me, I was in London at work and a London bus went past, maybe about 4 years ago. It had the word ‘vegan’ on the side of the bus. It was because Subway, the sandwich store, had brought out its vegan whatever... and they had it on all the buses. I thought the founders of the vegan society, Donald Watson and that, would never have believed London buses were driving along with the word ‘vegan’ on the side. So, this is an incredible time to be alive if you care about animals.

K: I say wow because even 8 years ago when I first went vegan it was very difficult to be accommodated as a vegan whenever you went anywhere, so it must have been harder 25 or 35 years ago.

P: Well, I think you probably got more resistance than we did. 35 years ago, no one even talked about it. Whereas, eight years ago, people were starting to talk about it. So you probably got it where people would really take umbrage that there was a vegan in the room. We were just nonsense, we were just self deprivational, people wouldn’t take you seriously, not even have a conversation. So, you probably got it worse than we did! I mean, there is resistance now, I still see it, like I've never seen it before. I think it’s because it’s coming, it’s a big truck without any breaks and it’s coming and you can’t stop it now. So, I think people are.... why did you go vegan 8 years ago?

K: Again, for animal rights reasons.

P: Did you see something? Like a documentary?

K: There wasn’t a specific thing, I'd been vegetarian for a long time since I was pretty small, just because I didn’t want to eat animals. I think it was a combination of things, I remember Earthlings came out about that time, maybe a bit before. Documentaries like that started coming out and I watched a few, and thought this is the right thing to do now.

P: Yeah, I'm always interested in people’s starting point. Having the centre, it’s been like this for 6 years, I mean you’re before that, but six years ago there was this turning point in the human race. I can mark it to the month actually, I don’t know what happened in that month, but we weren’t open to the public and our centre went from having one email a month saying “i know you’re a vegan center and I'd love to come and see what you’re doing”. So, we would team that person up with a member of the team and be shown around. That was it, that was it every month. From the point of us having email to six years ago, we’d have one email a month. Then, overnight, it went to 200 emails a month. Of course, we couldn’t accommodate. We had to come up with these opening hours and the formation of the centre being open to the public 16 hours a week. I don’t know what happened, but I can trace it back to that month. I’m always interested in what people saw, around 6 years ago. You were ahead of your time, 8 years ago, but it seems to be 6 years ago, this massive awakening for people.

K: I think at that time there were a lot of activists that became popular on social media, like Earthling Ed, but there was certainly more talk about it on social media. I did notice about 2 years after I went vegan, so many others did too.

P: Yes, absolutely! It was really about the time where you could go to the odd restaurant with vegan cheese, but then every restaurant had vegan cheese! I'd been waiting decades, now everywhere has it.

K: Haha, it was overnight really. If we come back to pigs for a second, how do you think pigs interpret their relationship with pigs at the sanctuary? I know the humans probably feel close relationships in their eyes, but how do you think pigs perceive them?

P: There’s definitely those pigs that look at us as rubbish! We have a few iron age pigs which are wild boar crosses, they are definitely very different in nature. They’re like “you’re staff, you can clean up and get on with it, but don’t come near me, don’t scratch me”, you know, not even easy to win over for a treat. The other pigs, I can’t even think of a single cruelty case that hasn’t come around in the end and hasn’t thought “no, you’re alright”. You know, yeah, just from the iron ages, I think they’re the only ones who do have a stand-offish approach to humans, but maybe that is the wild boar. Saying that, in 2019 I reared some little, tiny wild boar, mother had been killed on the road. I’ll send you a video, they lived in my house! They were never, ever wild! They were 6 hours old when they arrived, and the only mammal I’ve ever, ever had that didn’t have to be bottle fed. They were so, so grumpy and tired when they arrived that when I was making the milk up, they started drinking out of the bowl. They never needed a bottle, they are so independent. So, the ones who are a bit stand-offish are those ones with a bit of the wilderness still in them. I don’t blame them, you know, what humans have done to animals and what they continue to do to animals. I respect it, you keep that opinion. But I think the rest of them see you as part of their tribe, not straight away, but eventually. I can’t think of a single pig, apart from the iron ages, that you couldn’t get in the straw with, curl up with and lay on and pick their ears and clean them. They’re just, they’re just like dogs. You become part of the pack.

K: I hear a lot of people describe them like dogs.

P: Yeah.

K: How do you personally cope with maybe the loss of a pig when that happens?

P: I’m useless with losses. It never gets... in fact.... I think it gets worse when you get older, the losses. We’re all very busy when we’re younger, there's a hundred things to do every day, so your coping mechanism is a lot better, I do believe. I might be generalising hugely, but I believe, without a doubt, it takes them more time to recover. I can’t think of one of them that bounces back quickly. Having lost the three old ladies in one day... and you know, that’s the other thing, if you’re euthanizing animals, all three of them had to be put to sleep by a vet. You’re playing god. For a very good reason you’re playing god, but you’re absolutely playing God, but you’re saying goodbye to them. [Annie], who just went, she passed away in her sleep. A bit more of a relief because you think, she just went to sleep, that’s how my grandmother went to sleep. You got to always think, make sure euthanizing is absolutely the right timing. You generally do a day too early is better than a day too late. It’s this huge balance, I'm not good at that. I’d be the world’s worst person to do euthanasia, I'd be keeping them for me. I wouldn’t be letting them go when it’s time, so I'm very grateful to the managers and the staff at [rescue name] who will basically say to me, so-and-so is going to be put to sleep. It’s hard, but we have an amazing thing at [rescue name], called our memorial garden, and we have a memorial house with a book in it. Everyone who passes over gets added to the book. We have an area where we put their ashes, so when they’re cremated we have their ashes back. Some will be buried. You’re not really allowed to bury animals, but there will be some animals that definitely do get buried at [rescue name], for all sorts of maybe sentimental reasons. But we have a memorial garden, where we have a service, a lovely book. It makes it a little bit easier, but it’s not an easy thing. I don’t think, I can’t think of any member of the team who would find it easy.

K: And how do you think the pigs cope with a loss?

P: Yeah, so an interesting thing happened in 2020. In 2020, sorry, in 2019, we lost over the summer, or spring, we lost potentially 5 old males. All similar age, I can’t say their names because I would cry. Erm, they were all incredible, incredible characters. But what we realised is they were the peacekeepers, the old, neutered males were the peacekeepers. After we lost these little old gentlemen, we had havoc in the fields. We had everyone trying to get into a different bedroom, pushing their luck, you know, so-and-so used to sleep here, I'm having it now. So, you really notice, even if there is a big fight, the one who separates it will be one of the matriarchal females, but, it’s the males who are the peacekeepers. So, I don’t think it’s as easy... two things. I think they are better at letting go than we are. So, one of the signs they really understand is smell. So, I've seen pigs who’s partners or family members are passing away, or we’re attempting to get them out of the field, or a vet has come in to look at them. But they will continually nose them and push them, until the blood stops circulating. Then they will stop pushing, they stop, they feel. They’re so different to us, because we have these ridiculous attachments that we can’t do anything about. They’re so much better at that. That’s the first thing that I notice about them, so moving on is probably easier for them, because they understand... there’s things they understand, that we’ve lost, we obviously had it once and we lost it. So, I think, are they better? I don’t want to sound like “oh yeah, they’re better”, but I think they are. My observations are they definitely hurt, they definitely miss their families. There will be times that you’ll see that one that was a pair, and they’ve lost their pair, you’ll see that period of time when they’re a bit lost themselves.

K: Yeah, I've heard of pairs where one has died and the other has also died not long later for seemingly no reason.

P: That is definitely, definitely the case. Like [Annie], her sister went recently. Both of them 20, very old ladies. She was like a proper old lady, very skinny, she got to the point where she couldn’t get up and so, she had to be put to sleep. Once they can’t get up, there’s all sorts of horrible things that start happening to them. [Annie], there's two other family members of [Annie]’s family, but looking back, they were very, very close. Potentially sisters, or mother and daughter, I don’t know their history. They would always be in the sun together, in the barns together. It’s definitely, I think we lost [Annie] maybe 2 months after her sister.

K: Do we know why [Annie] passed away?

P: No. She was 20 years old, she was an old lady. Not as frail as her sister, so she might have been 21 maybe, but yeah, from literally just going into her bed, she died yesterday sorry. On all of her health checks she was fine, just a little old lady in bed. She was found the next morning while the team were doing the ward round. So, in a way, it’s better. You do question, did you miss anything? But putting anything to sleep, it’s never nice is it?

K: No.

P: It’s a funny one. I quite often ask the vet all sorts of funny questions about it. How do we know it’s alright? How do we know it’s alright to do this to them? But, it seems painless. Doesn’t it? It’s a difficult one.

K: It is, but we will end on a slightly more positive note, what’s your favourite part about working with pigs?

P: Boy, well, I’m very blessed. Obviously, I get to live at [rescue name]. Every time I'm not at a desk doing paid or unpaid work, unpaid at [rescue name] and paid elsewhere. [rescue name] is like my garden, so I can just go and see all of them. But I think this is the case with all animals, but maybe because there is a lot more pigs it might be more prevalent. There are those moments where you might just look round and there is a pig just looking at you. It is a pig you’ll know very well, but they’ll be looking at you. You know, we have a different speed of life, on our minds there’s like 150 things going on, but their days are a lot more relaxed, and they might be thinking “Dad, why are you just walking past?”. They’re just looking at you and staring, they just capture you so you go over and give them a good old scratch, an ear rub and a kiss or whatever. For me, that’s just so rewarding like, “there he is, there’s my dad!”. I might be thinking, oh god I've got to get up the field because there’s a tractor stuck, or a horse the other side of the fence or whatever. I’m rushing around, and there’s little Harrison, or Bradley looking up at me “dad, dad, we’re here!”. For me, that makes it all worthwhile. They’re as happy to see me as I am to see them. I don’t get to do the mucking out and the feeding because that’s not my role, but I'm lucky enough to have a more privileged role. My role with the pigs is just loving them, scratching them. I think it would just be the way they look at you, I just feel so privileged to live in an environment where there’s so many creatures that might not be here if [rescue name] wasn’t here. There’s a million good people behind [rescue name], it’s not just me with a magic wand. For me, I think for me it’s the smile. There’s an amazing picture of [Annie], we used to use it in our social events, she was with one of our trustees and their curling into her, and [Annie] is just smiling at her. There’s another pig, I will say his name, Jeremy, but it does still break my heart. I still have his brother. There was not a day that went by where that pig didn’t smile at you. He looked at you and looked into your soul. [wipes tear]. This incredible pig. He’s even now tattooed on so many peoples arms and legs and shoulders, because he touched so many peoples lives. He was so incredible. Anyway, I’m such a crybaby... look. I try not to say their names! It’s not because I forget their names, it’s because it breaks my heart every time. Anyway, he had a long and happy life with us. His brother is about 14 now. [laughs]. We were meant to finish on a good part!

K: At least we get to remember them all. Him being tattooed on people is lovely.

P: it’s the most incredible thing, the last tattoo I saw of him, on one of the helpers, it’s on this part of the arm [gestures]. There’s no outline to this pig, they’ve just drawn his features and it’s so incredible, they’ve just captured his features. It’s like he’s not a real animal, but you know sometimes you see things in the clouds, that is just like him. So, yeah, he is tattooed on people and all sorts of things. He lives on.