Interview with Jack (pseudonym) farmed animal sanctuary founder

1st March 2023, online.

Researcher – [K]

K: Can you tell me how the organisation became involved in rescuing pigs?  
  
P: Erm, so my partner and I when we met we were volunteering for different animal charities rescuing all kinds of animals and er, we moved to a house with lots of land and we both wanted to live a sustainable life which was our original plan and we just realised there were so many unwanted animals. We started rescuing animals and it just kinda took over, turned into an animal rescuing wild animals, pets and farm animals and it’s just grown and grown. So, we have everything except dogs and reptiles.

K: Why not dogs and reptiles?

P: reptiles are specialist and there’s a lot you need, and for dogs we don’t have kennels.

K: And where do the pigs you have typically come from?

P: I’d say predominantly from people who have bought them as pets and for unforeseen reasons have to give them up, things like illness or lost their land. But the majority are people, I even had one today, who have bought a pet pig and not done their research. “I’ve bought a pet pig and it’s really boisterous, he’s digging the garden up... digging the kitchen up, ripping up the carpet”. That’s what pigs do! So, the vast majority of people who have gone out and bought a piglet and haven’t done any research and now what they’ve got is a sexually frustrated and sexually mature pig, highly intelligent, but a pig living on it’s own. So, we also do rescue sort of commercial pigs, not many, because problem with commercial pigs is we rarely rehome them. It’s very difficult to find homes for pet pigs, let alone commercial pigs. We’ve actually got three commercial pigs at the moment, one escaped a factory farm as a piglet and came to us on deaths door. We managed to save her life and bottle fed her. We have another one that was abandoned by a farmer, the farmer moved on and left this massive boar. So we have him.

K: Would you say keeping pigs as pets has become more popular in recent years?

P: So yeah, I think ten years or so ago there was a craze. I remember seeing it on the BBC news about some woman with a pig then we saw a news article about micro pigs... I thought, oh no. We saw it coming. Celebrities were buying them. Even at a celebrity do, they were giving them away as prizes. So, yeah the hype was probably 10 years ago and people thought there were such things as micro pigs and teacup pigs. All the adverts were baby pigs, not fully grown, often being put in an oversized teacup to make them seem really small. People genuinely thought they were buying little pigs, they never thought to ask or do their research, or see the parents. People just thought that they’re cute and they’re gonna buy one. So, people are becoming a lot more educated that they don’t stay small. So it has tailed off a little bit in the past 3 or 4 years with people not expecting them to grow so big. Now, predominantly people get pigs and haven’t done research and they’ve got a pig they can’t look after or control. They didn’t realise it was going to destroy the garden for example. The amount of pigs we turn away is phenomenal, I think last year sadly we only rehomed 5 and turned away nearly 100. We generally turn away about 100 pigs a year. I think 2020 was one of our best years, I think we rehomed about 15 pigs. Loads of people have come to us wanting pigs, fortunately some people do their research and those who come to us who want them, come here and don’t get them. We show them the kind of fencing they need, what they will do to your garden... yeah, they’re great pets provided you can provide for them and you know, the people who do get pigs off us provide a good home because they know exactly what they need and what they are taking on. You can go to breeders, it’s like buying a second hand care, their not gonna say “yeah, the engine is a bit shit, it’s crap on fuel”. They will tell you it’s brilliant. So, the breeders will tell you the nice things because they want money. We are about animal welfare and we’d rather not home a pig than have it go to the wrong place. So we will do home checks and make sure they’ve got enough space, good fencing, some shelter, and we never ever rehome pigs on their own.

K: I’ve been speaking to a lot of pet pig owners and it does surprise me how many have one pig.

P: Yeah, and today I turned away a pig because it was destructive and boisterous, I said to them it’s because they’ve got it on it’s own. They are highly intelligent animals and they need companionship. She said “well, he’s bonded with me!”. If you’re on a desert island, would you rather be with another human being or a dog? Yeah, a dog is good company but you’d rather have a human, people just don’t get it. Pigs can’t communicate with humans, they might bond well with a human but they’d rather be with another pig.

K: Yeah, I hear people say it’s bonded with them or their dog.

P: Yeah, it’s not a replacement for a bond with another pig. They might make a bond because they have no other choice, but how can they communicate? They’re completely different.

K: What makes a pig a good pet?

P: They are full of character and intelligent. They’re quite vocal, so they will communicate to an extent. They’ve got lots of different noises and you will get to know when they are happy or in pain or excited, tired. They’re such amazing characters. They like human attention too. Pigs will come up to you very excited and vocally, they want human contact, they want to be stroked and scratched. You can have a massive commercial pig and they are exactly the same. Behaviours are the same, expect commercial pigs are a lot bigger. So, if you provide for a pig properly they can make fantastic pets. Generally, they are easy to look after.

K: What would make a responsible pet pig owner?

P: A person that has done their research. The pig has sufficient space, he can carry out normal behaviors like forage. You want lots of land so they can mud bath, they’ve got lots of shelter, strong fencing, and other pigs to keep them occupied. Not just throw out a bowl that will be gone in ten seconds. You need to be able to let them forage and carry out natural behaviours. Not always possible this time of year when it’s really muddy as pigs destroy their area and turn it into a big mud bath, but certainly in summer you can throw food around and let them find it like they would in the wild.

K: I’d also like to talk a bit about your relationship with the pigs on the sanctuary. How much did you know about pigs before you started rescuing them?

P: Very little, we had wild animals, pets, rabbits, guinea pigs, cats, sheep, goats, pigs, all kind of poultry. We basically learnt by doing. There’s nothing better than learning by getting your hands dirty. A lot of our volunteers are doing animal welfare courses, so might have the theory side but you ask them to catch a sheep and three hours later they haven’t caught the sheep!

K: Has having a relationship with the pigs on the sanctuary changed your perception of them at all?

P: I suppose I've always been an animal lover, not eaten animals for 35 years, been a vegan for like 22 years. I think the more time spent with animals, I think there’s just something special about animals. I think the more you befriend animals the more you hate humans! Animals are so forgiving, they don’t do half the thing humans do. I think it’s very special spending your time with them, they’ve got such intelligence. They’re not selfish and arrogant like humans. Pigs are probably my second favourite animals, shouldn’t really have favorites but cows are my favourite.

K: Why’s that?

P: Erm, they’re just curious. Cows are very curious and I think you can just go in and lie down with a tonne bull and all they want is scratching and cuddling, but pigs are a close second, they have the intelligence over cows. Pigs are just so entertaining.

K: How would you describe a pig to someone who has never met them before?

P: Very intelligent, curious animal. Very bold, they are highly intelligent and communicate. Incredibly strong too, you don’t realise how strong pigs are, even small pigs. Incredible animals.

K: That must be nice to see them interact as a family group.

P: We’ve had a few piglets, some rescued from farms. We’ve had I think six piglets someone had dumped outside a vet. They had umbilical cord attached. We hand rear lots of wildlife too as well as pigs, lots of calves because we rescue a lot of dairy calves. It’s special to share your life with such amazing creatures, especially knowing what they’ve gone through, and how much they trust humans too after what we’ve done to them.

K: How does hand rearing change the relationship you have with an animals?

P: It’s almost like a maternal bond, my partner does most of it she’s got a natural knack and is very good with it. When you lose an animal, because that does happen, it is upsetting. You put hours and hours and hours into it and have a real close bond with that animal. Particularly if that animal comes in and it’s on deaths door and you manage to turn it around, you have a very strong emotional bond. We’ve got a commercial pig here at the moment called [Berry], She had the umbilical cord still attached, stone cold, and was on deaths door. We phoned the farmer and he didn’t care because he didn’t know which pig it had come from. We warmed her up, gave her fluids, and started feeding her eventually. Now, five years later we have a pig that’s abot 150 kilos, she’s enormous! So, there is highs and lows it’s an emotional rollercoaster, you rescue and animal then rehoming, you’re happy because they are getting a lifelong home but you will miss that animal. Then there are days where you might have to euthanise an animal or you lose an animal.

K: How do you cope with the loss of a pig?

P: Try and be positive and think that you’ve given that pig a good life, they’ve been looked after and you’ve done everything you can to try and save it. Ultimately, you know it is the right decision. We are always very pragmatic and make decisions based on what’s right for the animal, not what’s right for us. So many people will keep an animal alive because they wanna be with it, thinking that’s the right thing. You can leave it too late but not really too early. Do what you can, but ultimately before it starts to suffer.

K: So do you experience any common health problems?

P: Not really, the females you get quite a few with ovarian cancer. That is the only common thing I suppose, we have one at the moment, or we believe it is ovarian cancer. We’re not going to do a test, there’s no point. With any pig you make sure you get more good days than bad days. When there are more bad days than good days, it’s time to say goodbye. I’d say actually ovarian cancer is second common. The most common thing is arthritis, we tend to get that more in commercial pigs because farm animals have been selectively bred for reason. Bred to produce tonnes of eggs, or tonnes of meat, or tonnes of meat. In the case of pigs, they have been bred to grow very quick and produce cheap meat and the consequences are very big pigs that haven’t evolved to be that way and as they get older, they become far less mobile and very arthritic. So, most commercial pigs by the time they are 7 or 8 it’s time to euthanise them because they are so arthritic. You do get it with the pet pigs when they get older, erm nowehere near as the way you get it with commercial pigs. Another thing common in commercial pigs is hernias. They tend to say herniate into the scrotum quite often and that is again, euthanasia quite sadly. I think the hernias are genetic weakness through inbreeding, I’ve never had it in pet pigs.

K: How do you manage conditions like arthritis?

P: We try to give them medication which is difficult in terms of getting them to take it. We can give Metacam which is an anti-inflammatory painkillers. Paracetamol you can slip into bananas. Basically with medication and making sure they have plenty of bedding. Ultimately, we see those animals every day so you’re constantly assessing, sometimes they have good days and sometimes they might have a bad day. It’s making sure that... we won’t just euthanize a pig for arthritis unless they are really not enjoying life. I’ve got one at the moment, some mornings he just can’t get up to eat his breakfast, so he is close. The other day I went up and he couldn’t get up, this was the second day and I was gonna get the vet out, but the next day he was up waiting for breakfast. You know, so he is at the stage where soon I will be euthanizing him. I just monitor him every day but we know we are doing the right thing for him.

K: Is he an older pig?

P: He is, I don’t really know how old he is. Quite often pigs come in and you don’t know their history. We did have an old pig that we rescued that came in on her own and I wanted a friend for her so I picked one up from another rescue so that was him. I expect he’s a good old age, we’ve had him about 5 years. Erm, he was an old boy then so I'm sure he is probably 10 or so. The other thing as well, talking about responsible pet ownership, one of the issues we do have is people who don’t do their research, people get the cheapest food and it’s for commercial pigs. So commercial pig food is designed to get a pig very fat, very quick for slaughter. So, we get a lot of overweight pigs in. Many overweight pigs in. He was one. People have overfed them because the commercial food is cheapest.

K: What food would you recommend in place of that?

P: Well you can get proper pet pig food, it’s better for them, not designed to put weight on. With commercial pigs you can get sow & wiener nuts to feed the babies, then you can get growth food to make them grow. Then you can get finisher food. I hate that terminology, with pet pig food it’s more blended to maintain weight, and there is feeding instructions on the back. But people get the cheapest ones that are to make them grow very fast. Usually we give them pet pig food and a lot of vegetables as well. Luckily we get waste fruit and veg from the supermarkets so our pigs are very well fed, they get papaya, apple, bananas, cherries, pineapples, brown bread and loads of bananas. They are very well fed, and I think fed better than us!

K: I didn’t know there were pet pig nuts available.

P: so many people don’t, they don’t do their research. So yeah, we buy a brand called Alan & Page, it’s one of the higher end brands but it is formulated for health, it’s a high end brand so it’s not got the crap in it like a lot of the others and is not genetically modified. And it’s also vegetarian. None of our feed has animal products in because things like BSE start from humans feeding animals to herbivores. Being a vegan too, I don’t wanna feed animals to other animals regardless. But yeah, very few people know the difference in the food and just go to buy the cheapest which is designed for commercial pig, to get a pig to slaughter weight in a few months

K: What is your relatonship with your vet like?

P: We have multiple vets but for farm animals we tend to deal with one practice and we have a very good relationship with them, been dealing with them from almost day one. They know us, obviously they are a farm vet and when you go to most places it is about cost and if the animal costs too much, it’s euthanasia. They know that that’s not the case here, it’s the best care for the animal, regardless of the cost, they know that. They will advise us knowing we are a rescue and not commercial farm.

K: Are they ever unsure about how to treat a farmed animal at the rescue?

P: yeah, but so generally with farm vets there isn’t as much money in it like there is with pet vets. Farmers don’t want to spend the money. They will only call a vet out if they have to and if it’s too expensive, it’s euthanasia because it’s about money. So, most farm vets aren’t paid a lot, so what you find is all the farm vets are young and just come out of university. So, that’s a bit of an issue. But we do trust the practice and them. So a vet came out the other day to euthanise a pig, she’d never euthanised a pig before, which worried me, but what she did do was consult another vet. So, that is a downside of farm vets, they are generally young and inexperienced because it’s part of the learning curve to go into farm animals first.

K: Are they ever willing to try experimental treatments with the animals?  
  
P: Yep, so I mentioned the commercial pig who... this farmer had left his land and left this boar, so a big massive boar and he was entire. When you castrate farm animals, it’s not like pets who you take to the practice and they do it in sterile conditions and stitch them back up. You can’t do that with a farm animal. So, they will give a local anesthetic, open up the scrotum and take the testicles out and they leave a hole and leave it to drain and heal and give them a very high dose of antibiotics. So, we spoke to the vet about options and they said they believed you could chemically castrate them, so they did their research, spoke to manufacturers and a vet came out and chemically castrated him. They’d never done it before. Yeah, and that lasted two or three months until the autumn when we could get him physically castrated. We saw an instant change in his behaviour even with the chemical castration. He was a lot more subdued because obviously you want to suppress the testosterone, he’s a very powerful pig. Once he swiped me and ripped a brand new pair of jeans. That was just a side swipe, so you have to respect animals.

K: How many pigs do you have currently?

P: We’ve got 9 at the moment, no, 10.

K: Are they housed in groups?

P: Yeah they live in groups, apart from one of our commercial pigs, I haven’t found anyone to bond her with yet. We planned to bond the chemically castrated pig, with her. Had a few attempts of bonding them, he wants to be her friend but she doesn’t. So, I haven’t managed to bond them yet. But yeah, generally in pairs. If they come in a pair we will keep them as a pair, we had 5 come in a while ago and we kept them as the 5. I will break them up to rehome them, I won’t take one away but I might split them into a group of 2 and 3. I don’t like doing that but it’s better to do that and have them overcome that because I need to rehome them. If we can’t rehome then we can’t take more commercial pigs. I think we’ve only ever rehomed two commercial pigs.

K: where did they go to?

P: So, one of them went to a lady who lived on a farm and she had cows, sheep and pigs. The other one was [Berry], we did rehome her but sadly she did come back, which we do, we are responsible. She went somewhere for like two years, but she kept smashing her way out of fencing and people were frightened of her because she was so huge, so she had to come back.

K: Is it difficult to reintroduce them?

P: Um, well it’s no different to bonding any pig, you just take your time.

K: Did you have any other challenges when you were just starting the rescue?

P: I suppose the first one was planning permission, the rules and regulations around what we do, and all the DEFRA rules... like most of our animals have to be ear tagged, well that’s about traceability if they go into the meat trade, my animals are not going in the meat trade. So, most farm animals don’t live very long so it doesn’t matter if they are ear tagged, but often when they get older the tags just get ripped out and it’s horrible. But yeah, a lot of red tape. Rules and regulations... the rules, regulations, laws don’t help us. We are a charity there for the benefit of the public. We wanted to convert our garage to a wildlife hospital, we had to go through it all and pay the money, neighbors can object. So yeah, a lot of challenges, not least raising money. It’s a lot of red tape, er, dealing with the public, the public think you’re there to be used and abused, like it’s our job to take in our unwanted animals. People dump animals here thinking that it’s our responsibility. So, if you want to have a charity you’ve also got to have a bit of a business mind, you’ve almost got to run it like a business, have your governance in place, sort insurance out, deal with the public, social media, grant applications, all the red tape.

K: What’s your favourite thing about working with pigs?

P: I get to see pigs every day. For me, I think it’s first thing in the morning I feed the cows first because I have to because they’re waiting at the gate. The next thing that gets fed is the pigs, sometimes quite early about 6:30, 7am. In the winter it might be cold, dark, windy, you’re tired... but the pigs are always happy, always happy to see you. They communicate back, they know you’re coming and it just makes my day. I mean, they look cute and they’re just fantastic... the way they communicate. I’ll give you an example, our first every pig rescue. He used to sleep in the yard and he was really vocal, as soon as he heard your voice he was so noisy because he was happy to see you. You could tell from the different noises he made whether he was excited to see you, if he was grumpy, you could walk into the yard and know by the noise he was making and if he had his head down he would run off, he knew he’d done something wrong.. You'd say “what have you done?” You’d go in and find he’d broken into the feed store, or tipped over the cows’ water. He knew he wasn’t supposed to do it and knew he would get caught and you could hear he’d make a certain noise, almost like “oh shit! You've caught me!”.

K: He sounds like a character!

P: Oh yeah he was, they are all characters.