Interview with Max (pseudonym) farmed animal sanctuary founder

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Researcher – [K]

K: in just a few words, could you tell me how your organisation became involved with rescuing pigs?

P: Er, right, well we’ve been running for about 30 years now. We didn’t rescue any pigs till we moved to the current location, well we got two locations at the moment. The place I'm at now we got in 1996. The first pigs we got, somebody approached us saying there were some pigs and goats on a caravan site in Clacton that weren’t supposed to be there. They kept getting onto the golf course next door. The RSPCA had been called to deal with it, and they were all going to be shot. We sent a transporter in to pick them up and bring them to the sanctuary and that was our first experience with pigs. We hadn’t had pigs before, but the pigs and goats obviously got on with eachother. The goats would sometimes stand on the pig's backs. The pigs were pretty chilled, they were all horrifically underweight, but obviously, we fed them up. That’s how we started with pigs, since then we’ve been asked to take a number of pigs, all together now we have just about 100.

K: Right, and you said not many of them were pet pigs before?

P: Not many, no. We have had a few that have been kept in houses until their landlords found out and they had to get rid, because obviously they didn’t want a pig in the house. Erm, and also people who have rescued pigs from being slaughtered and kept them in their garden until they got too big. Most of our pigs are rescue pigs that have been on the way to slaughter, or gonna be slaughtered, or from farms that are closing down. The male boar has been rescued along with the female and all her babies. Unfortunately, a lot of the female pigs were pregnant when they came here. Even last week, I was asked to take 25 more pigs and I can’t. I just don’t have the space or money to do that. Again, typical scenario is an idiot will buy two pigs, won’t get the male castrated. This is what happened with these, started off with two, now she’s got 25. Still none of them are castrated. It’s like, Hello?!... well, I'm not gonna swear on our interview, but it’s pretty depressing the level of intelligence you get with people, when you put boy animals and girl animals together, you’re gonna get lots of little animals, and that’s what happened. Or, people will get rid of females. We had about 6 females we were asked to take a few years ago, they turned out all to be pregnant. So, we ended up with about 40 pigs from that. Then, it’s difficult, of course you have to get all the boys castrated and that’s why we’ve ended up with about 100 pigs at the moment.

K: So is it a policy when you take boars in they have to be castrated?

P: Well, no. It’s difficult with pigs, you can only really castrate baby pigs. Castration with a piglet with a local anaesthetic is very easy to do, you can hold the piglet in your lap while the vet injects, when they are numb, it’s slit slit and out they come. They will either leave the wound open or sew it up dependent on the pig that it is. That’s a very quick thing to do. If an adult pig comes in, very different kettle of fish, not a very vegan thing to say, but adult pigs do not do well under anaesthetic. We have only ever had one adult pig castrated, he was advertised in a magazine as ready for slaughter. Some vegan saw it and bought him, to save him from that fate. When he came in, he was an entire male, probably about 2 years old, so we decided to try and get him castrated. Having done that, I would never do it again. It took 3 times the recommended dose of ketamine to get him down, even then he was struggling to get up during the operation. It’s a horrible operation to do, but you’ve also got the additional complication that it’s difficult to do in the field, farm vets don’t have surgeries, like a domestic vet, they just operate locally on site. Obviously, sanitary conditions not as good as they would be in a surgery theater. A wound in that place is prone to infection and as I say, pigs don’t do well on ketamine, they can just die under anaesthetic. So, if an adult bore comes into us then we would leave them separate, we would build an area for them and put them into the separate area where they can spend their life in sight and sound of other pigs. But you can’t mix adult bored with castrated pigs because they’ll fight. Adult boars will always fight and wound each other significantly, so you just can’t do it. Neutered pigs, they will still fight, whenever you put pigs together they will fight, fight for hierarchy. But 99 times out of 100 they won’t inflict any significant damage. But they will definitely fight and it can be quite horrible to watch, but you have to let them establish the hierarchy. You can’t just go interfering and separate the fight because you’re likely to get your hands bitten off.

K … Right is it mainly animals rights activists that seek the pigs out and bring them to you?

M … No, not really. Where we had the 6 girls who were all pregnant; they were apparently dumped in Birmingham and the woman had them on a piece of land and she didn’t want them anymore. On a couple of occasions we’ve had piglets dumped off in boxes, sometimes vet students when they are working with piglets realise at the end of the course the pigs will be killed. Sometimes they rescue them and I don’t know whether they smuggle them out but we have in the past been just left with a piglet in a box saying “please look after this piglet” a bit like Paddington Bear. So when a piglet is left at the gate in a box all you can do is take it in and look after it so I have hand reared a number of piglets. I don’t tend to ask questions when piglets are just left outside, obviously A (there is nobody there to ask and B I don’t want to know)

K … That’s interesting I’ve never heard one being dropped off from perhaps a vet student.

M … Yeah I’ve had that a couple of times obviously most vet students aren’t vegan so they’re not seemingly bothered by that. Those that are vegan or are being awakened a little bit are thinking “hang on a minute, this isn’t right.” I do know quite a few, I do know two or 3 vet students who are vegan, I know they’re going to struggle when they come to do things like that.

K … That would be difficult. Are you a vegan sanctuary?

M … Yes. Well there’s no such thing as a vegan sanctuary we are a sanctuary run by vegans, if you say you are a vegan sanctuary then I’ll as you to define what you mean by that because I don’t know what that is. We are vegans that run a sanctuary and we have animals that are mainly herbivores and obviously some are carnivores. So … and obviously I regularly tread on ants when I step on the ground.

K … And before we move on to talking about the pigs you have on site have you seen with pet pigs any trends in recent years, is it getting more or is it staying the same or perhaps less?

M … I don’t see it getting any worse to be honest, not so much with pigs I think pigs are much less of a problem than dogs because everyone gets dogs then gets rid of them. I think the dog problem is far greater than the pig problem. Chickens are another major problem, I know this isn’t about chickens but people always get chickens or people get eggs and hatch them out then they realise that they are males and then they don’t want them because they make a noise and they don’t lay eggs so they get rid of them. So the chicken thing is a massive problem. I haven’t noticed anymore increase in pet pigs ownership but obviously that might just be our situation we might not be receiving those requests. I’m sure it is still a massive problem because obviously piglets are extremely cute and people like to have them but people don’t realise that they are going to grow, that piglet is going to grow into a 100kg or 70/80kg of pig when it’s an adult. There is no such thing, I think people think go guinea pigs sometimes but a pig is much bigger and heavier than that and extremely destructive too, if you have a pig in your garden you won’t have much of a garden left because they root round digging all the grass up, they’re very destructive.

K … I heard a couple of sanctuaries talking in lockdown, they got an influx of chickens last year and a couple did say the same thing with pigs. That pet pigs were bought during lockdown.

M … I’m sure that did happen but obviously I haven’t personally seen an increase in requests apart from this girl who wanted us to take 25 the other day but I can’t I don’t have the finances, we have 600 animals I can’t just willy nilly keep taking on animals to help people out with their problems particularly when they don’t want to cough up and pay for them. Which is bizarrely with pigs, pigs tend to come, they’re the least likely chance of someone sponsoring an animal they want to dump on a sanctuary is when its a pig. People with pigs, they just, when they get rid of the pig it’s like [gestures to washing your hands] that’s it not mine anymore, even if you ask can you support the pig they’ll say “oh yes yes yes” but as soon as you’ve taken it, it’s like fuck off. sorry I swore.

K … It’s alright you’re allowed, but moving on to the pigs residing at your sanctuary, can you tell me about the pigs living spaces.

M … Yep, we’ve got two sights this one and also another farm so here we’ve got a 3 acre paddock which is divided up into a couple of areas. In the main area which is about 2.5 acres I’ve got a herd of 50 pigs that just roam in that area. It’s all fenced in our lesson with fencing is that it has to be done properly otherwise they will get out so we’ve had to put in around the entire perimeter of the 3 acres. We’ve had to put a concrete footing 18 inches into the ground to stop them digging it out from underneath that’s got posts every 6 feet the whole way around and tin sheets all around then scaffold boards to keep them in. Inside that area they’ve got separate houses we’ve got some pig arcs but generally we build the houses ourselves because we could build bigger and better houses than we can get with pig arcs, pig arcs are expensive we’ve probably got about 8 houses between those 50 pigs they can all easily get in, whether they go in the houses or not is up to them they’re kept strawed up, particularly this time of year it does get quite muddy, their used to be 2-3 feet of grass in this field when we first moved the pigs here, but they’ve completely decluttered the field of any living thing, so it’s basically a paddock but it becomes very dry and dusty in the summer and it becomes very wet and boggy in the winter, there are some areas which are dryer obviously inside the houses which are dry, they’ve to straw beds in there and it’s perfectly dry so as long as they’ve got space to get out the wet if they want to and also we put in half tonne bales of straw into the field, as many as we need to keep a massive area of straw, the pigs basically push that round and make a big pad which they like to play and sit on.

K … So it’s a bigger field rather than individual pens

M … Yeah it’s a big field with the 50 in it, then there’s another field within that field which is kind of an area there’s about 15 or 16 smaller pigs that didn’t really get on with the big pigs. Most of the big pigs are like Large Whites your big meat types pigs or … I forget the other breeds … most of them are quite big but there are a lot of other small ones, they live in a separate area because they were getting bullied or they weren’t getting in with the food with the big pigs because the big pigs can be quite bullish, those 15 live in a separate area, then I’ve got another smaller area where I’ve got 3 older pigs who are probably geriatrics that can’t cope in a herd environment, once they get to the point where they can’t cope with living outside then I’d bring them to the stable block which is on this side of the road our property is split across the road so the pigs live on the other side of the road this side of the road where I am is where the house and stables are, we’ve got a very large American barn style arrangement. We got about a dozen pigs that live across the road but they got the point where they didn’t enjoy being over the road anymore so I moved them here and they basically have the life of Riley because they just roam around the stables wherever they want to go they’ve got a paddock they can go into if they want to where it’s wet and muddy with extra housing or they sleep in the stables inside the American barn style barn so they’ve got nice dry straw beds so it’s kind of their retirement area when they’ve got to a certain point or if they’ve got ill and they need a certain type of treatment I need them on this side of the road.

K: A bit like a care home.

P: Yeah, yeah. The pigs up at the otherfarm, they live in the woods. So, we have, at great expense, fenced off about three acres of woods. In the back of the farm land, there was a wooded farm area where the horses and cows didn’t go, so we fenced that all off, got it divided up into three areas, a group of 9, a group of 6 and a group of 3. The whole area is called Piglet Woods, they basically all live in the woods, they’ve got houses in there too and if you look on our Instagram you can see videos of [My partner] feeding the pigs in the wood. The have the absolute best environment ever, because pigs in woods is what you really want, about as natural as you can get.

K: And how do you determine which ones go into the woods and which ones go into the herds?

P: It was just, as they were rescued they went up to the farm site. Once we got the fencing completed we moved them out, since then there’s been some extra pigs and we integrated them with the pigs in the woods and it seemed to work fine. So, it was just as it happened, there wasn’t much decision making like “that one can go with that one, that one can go there”, it was just as and when. There was 15 arrived at once at the farm, so that 15 were in barns, that 15 went in the woods in two family groups because they didn’t really like each other and tended to have a bit of a scuffle.

K: And you said you had some pregnant pigs come in, what happens during the farrowing process?

P: Well, we didn’t know they were pregnant. The person who delivered them said they weren’t pregnant. They were in the field across the road, one morning I went over there and there were just a load of piglets suckling off their mum. It was no problem, we just left them to their own devices, you can interfere too much. These animals generally speaking will get on with what they want to do. The three mothers that all had piglets within a day of each other, we left them to their own devices and they brought up their families. When the boys were about 2 months old we got them castrated, now they all live together with their mums. They’re all in a family group, and they’re the smaller ones that are in this area on their own. That was quite a few years ago now, there’s about 18 now of them left. But we didn’t have a maternity thing, it wasn’t like “oh my god she’s giving birth now”, we didn’t know. It wasn’t obvious they were pregnant. Just went over there one morning and was like “oh, there’s a load of piglets.”

K: a bit of a surprise.

P: They know what they’re doing, they came from a place where they’ve been breeding and breeding and breeding, it wasn’t her first litter. So, you just let them get on with it. We don’t intentionally breed any animals because we’re a sanctuary, we don’t generally spay the females because it’s a much bigger operation, it’s easier to neuter the boys. You could argue if that was vegan, neutering an animal, but I'm not really interested in getting into those semantics about who’s more vegan, or that’s not a vegan thing to do. We have to be sensible, we’re looking after lots of animals, we can’t let them breed, but we can’t keep them all in individual houses either because that’s not fair. We leave them to get on in as natural environment as possible, with the girls and boys mixed together, but the boys are not capable of reproducing.

K: Yeah, you’re balancing the pros and cons. Could you run my through the day to day caring for the pigs from morning to evening?

P: They all get breakfast, which is pignuts, fresh produce and bread which we get donated by a local supermarket. I go down the stables in the morning and I feed all the pigs down there with a sack of pig nuts and a bit of bread, then I go across the road and take a massive double wheelbarrow of food across the road, distribute that around the field, putting as many piles out as possible so they can all get a share. Then I look at them, make sure there’s nobody hanging about not getting any food, thing is, when you’re managing a herd, when you’ve got 60-70 pigs living together, you just have to keep an eye on the general health of the herd, so I can look round and see if somebody is not doing well, somebody might be limping, somebody might be underweight, there are a couple of oldies over there which I keep an eye on and make sure they get plenty of food. If their weight drops below a certain point, I'd go and catch them, which is not easy, get the van out, get a couple of people and bring them over this side of the road and give them some dedicated feeding until I can get them up to a more comfortable weight. Generally speaking, they might live to 8, 10, 12 years. Most of the pigs on that side of the road are 6-7, that kind of age range, and generally healthy. It’s just a question of checking them over visually, and if you can spend some time just looking, look at their behavior, that’s the best way of telling how happy everyone is. If there’s a pig sat in the corner who hasn’t moved, I know they might have a problem. They might be tired or having an off day. I’ll see who it is, I don’t know every individual's name, obviously, but some of the more character pigs have names. Then basically I let them get on with it, check the houses, check the waters, all the waters are on mains supply, so I don’t have to fill them up, they’ve always got a fresh supply. In the summertime, I just make sure they have a wet area too. So, I have separate hosepipes that I can just run into the corner of the field so they can sit in the mud, should they choose to do so. Then I repeat the process in the afternoon. This time of the year, about 4 o’clock, when it gets dark, I go over again with another wheelbarrow of food, do the same process again, make sure everyone is alright, make sure the waters aren’t full of crap, if they are we clean them out. Same thing in the stables, take another bag of food, feed the pigs, make sure everyone is alright. You can generally tell, there’s a lot of running around, if someone is under the weather, then take it from there really. Sometimes they might have an off day and be okay the next day. They might have a limp one day, might be just they slept funny. From 30 years of doing this, I know when to call a vet.

K: And do you see any common health problems that pigs have?

P: Not really, no. Pigs are pretty bloody robust, they’re extremely robust animals. Their immune systems are incredible, obviously they are wallowing and nosing through filth and mud all day long when they’ve got the opportunity to do so. They very rarely get ill. The only things you have to do with them is watch their claws, or their trotters if they get long. That can be difficult to trim them, especially if they don’t want you to. Same as dogs, pigs are very much like dogs, they like attention, they like belly rubs. In terms of illnesses, apart from age, which obviously isn’t an illness, that’s just when they get old, they start to lose weight, when they can’t get up anymore under their own steam, that’s the point where I start thinking whether I have to let them go. If they can almost get up and they just need a hand in the mornings, like some of the geriatric ones over here, then as long as they’re happy to grub around, they’re not losing weight, eating and drinking then I'll keep them going. If it gets to the point where I think they’re struggling, then I'll call the vet out and they’ll have to be put to sleep.

K: How do you decide whether a pig needs to see a vet?

P: Just really experience. If we’ve got a pig with an injury, say for example, there’s two things; you can either get injuries or you can get diseases. Pig diseases are touch wood, quite rare. We did have one pig once that got meningitis. Apparently, as I understand it, all pigs carry meningitis all the time, it’s just if it gets on top of them from some other condition. He was treated, we knew he wasn’t right, he wasn’t eating, the vet came out and saw him. Whether he did have meningitis or not, I don’t know, but that’s what the vet said. He gave him injections and he was okay. If it’s an injury, I just need to assess what kind of injury it is. If it’s a cut, it depends how deep and how bad it is, if it’s a minor cut, an abrasion to the skin, there’s nothing you can do really, apart from put antibacterial spray on it. It’s alamycin, something I've got, a veterinary prescription spray. We always have alamycin around, so I can spray it on any wounds. If it’s got a deep wound, what I tend to do it take a photo of it and send it to our vet on Whatsapp. Our farm vet will say, “yeah, we need to come out”, or “no, you can deal with that.” We have a relationship with our farm vet, thanks to whatsapp and things like that, they don’t have to come out all the time to assess something. If the animal is not getting up and something going on in their eyes or.... if the pig can’t get up, then I call the vet. If they can get up, walk about, eat, drink, go to the toilet, and if they run away from you when you try and catch them, then you think “is there much wrong really?”. Probably not. I don’t know how other sanctuaries work, but you can take their temperature if you want, but we work on a non-interference basis, we don’t wanna keep mollycoddling these animals, because what they really want is company of their own kind. They don’t particularly want people crawling over them all the time checking they’re alright, but clearly if someone is under the weather, when you live everyday the same, I see these animals on a daily basis, obviously if I notice that someone is under the weather. You know, sometimes we get a lame horse. But I won’t call the vet out for a lame horse, I'll see how it goes over the next few days. If it deteriorated then I call the vet. But if it gets better, which 99 times out of 100 it does, then there’s no need to do anything. I’ve got a couple of big Clydesdale’s here and they are prone to getting abscesses in their feet, they might just work their way out, it might need a farrier, it might not. I have farrier tools so I can do stuff, but if it’s beyond my skillset then I'll call the vet or I'll call the farrier. Generally, it’s just based on experience of having done it over the last 30 years.

K: Do you use just one veterinary practice?

P: No, no. There’s a couple, we’ve got a domestic local practice for cats and dogs, and we’ve got a couple horse vets, and also we’ve got a farm vet for the cows, sheep and pigs.

K: Would you say you trust your farm vets?

P: Er, yeah.

K: You have a good relationship with them?

P: Yeah, we also work closely with Cambridge University Equine Hospital, I know a couple of the vets up there who are brilliant. I can always message them and say I've got a problem, can you help. A lot of the time, if an animal needs an operation, a farm animal, the farm vet won’t be able to do it. As I say, the farm vet doesn’t have a practice because for farm animals, 99.999% of farm animals in this country are here for food. Therefore, they live on farms and each one is seen as an asset that has a value. An adult sheep might be £70 to a farmer at a market, if he calls the vet out, that’s £100 before they start. He or she is not going to do that, consequently, a lot of farm vets don’t have an awful lot of experience in dealing with operations on farm animals. However, the exception would be Cambridge University, for example, I know it’s not pigs, but we had a cow with a fractured leg, on a farm he would have just been shot, that would have been the end of it, but Cambridge said they’d be keen to do an operation on a cow, because they don’t get the chance to do an operation on a cow for their students, because no farmer is willing to pay for it. So, we spend a couple thousand pounds on having Jonathon’s leg fixed, having it put in a cast and he’s still with us today, four or five years later, as a result of their intervention. You couldn’t have got that done anywhere else. Had he have been a horse, we would have been looking at £10,000, but Cambridge are very good to us and just charge what it costs rather than trying to make profit out of it like most vets.

K: That’s good, so it’s more like experimental procedures with the university?

P: Yeah, we have taken sheep up there as well. I know it’s not pigs, but bare with me, we got a phonecall a couple years ago from a farmer who had found that dogs had been ravaging his sheep in the field, he had 6 sheep that were badly injured. He didn’t realise because they were out on the moors, he had hundreds of acres and realised about 6 sheep that were really badly torn to pieces. Two of them he had to shoot because they were so bad, we took the other 4 and 2 sadly died, 2 of them went up to Cambridge university and they both died under the operating theater, but we tried to get them saved, the other 2 weren’t badly savaged, it was just a question of managing the wounds until they healed. Those two sheep are with us today. We have had a pig operated on by a vet, who had a non-descended testicle, obviously where you castrate boy pigs, if you don’t have a descended testicle it’s not easy to do. One of our vets did actually say they would be happy to do that operation which was very unusual, but she just did it for the experience of operating on a pig. It wasn’t a massive pig, but again, it’s very unusual to find a vet who will do an operation on a pig. They might say they wanna do it because of course they could charge you a fortune for it, good money making opportunity. I’m not that cynical usually.

K: If we talk about the relationships with your pigs, you said you operate on a non-interference basis, so would you say that pigs seek out relationships with humans?

P: There’s a couple of pigs in there that are quite affectionate, they will come up to you and if you start stroking them, they will flop down for a belly rub. Whether they would seek you out to do that, I don’t know, but if you go up to them they will let you play with them. The pigs on this side of the road I have a closer relationship with, because I'm interact with them, when I'm feeding the sheep and horses, cleaning the stables out, they’re out and around me all the time. I see them literally 8 hours a day. Those ones, particularly there’s a little one called [Flora] who will always want attention, but she was a little pet pig of someone’s, so she was bought up having attention. If she’s in the stable she will seek you out and start rubbing against your leg, saying “i’m here, can you give me a scratch please”, like a little dog. I dare say, the other pigs, if you gave them the opportunity to do that they would do that. She’s just used to it. The guys across the road are used to being in a herd, used to doing their own thing without us getting in the way too much, except going to put straw in the houses and distributing the food. You can tell, even some of the sheep love having their neck scratched, but they don’t know they love having their neck scratched until you do it, and they realise “oh, I quite like this”. There’s a little one who had realised she likes having her neck scratched, she will come up to me every day, stretch her neck out to me until I scratch her neck. They’re not stupid, they’ll come and ask for it.

K: And how do you describe pigs to someone who might not know much about them?

P: I’d say they’re just like dogs.

K: I hear that a lot.

P: Just like dogs, same sort of thing, they will learn to follow you around, wag their tails, talk to you, they’ll greet you in the morning with a kind of ‘hello’ noise. I’m not going to do an impersonation, sorry. They’ll do a little greeting noise, wait round for the food because they know it’s coming, so they’re just like dogs. Whereas sheep are like cats.

K: Why do you say that?

P: I don’t know, just my observations. Have you got a cat?

K: I do, yeah.

P: You know when a cat sits at the door and you open the door and the cat looks up at you like “what the fuck have you opened the door for? I was just sitting here”. Sheep are like that, you’ll open the gate, and they’ll look at you like “what do you want?”. They do that. I’ve only got two cats here at the moment, one loves attention, and the other is a feral who doesn’t like being touched. She’s been here 5 years like that, she won’t change. Sheep are like that, they won’t come near you, or they can’t get enough of you. They’ll come up to you and bully you to stroke them. You could say they’re like people, some are more gregarious, and others aren’t. Some are solitary, some want company, and some are assholes. Some pigs are assholes, some are bloody difficult and always get in the way, so they’re all different but generally speaking, pigs are like dogs and sheep are like cats.

K: And how much did you know about pigs before you took the first lot in?

P: I had read the three little pigs. You know the one?

K: [laughs] Yep, I know that one.

P: Nothing really, just that first pig we got, we didn’t know anything about pigs, but it’s not rocket science really. If you were keeping a bizarre tropical fish that lives in salt water and needs to be this much saline, that’s a skill to look after a fish like that, and I wouldn’t want to do that. A pig is a pretty robust pet, it doesn’t require that much knowledge, other than the fact you know they’re going to escape, unless your fencing is good, and they’re going to destroy your garden if you put them in a garden, or they’re going to dig up all your grass. They’re not that difficult, you can buy specialist pig food for them. They will eat pretty much anything, though they’re not keen on citrus fruits. They won’t eat lemons or limes, can’t blame them. They will eat oranges, satsumas or clementines, the little sweet ones. They’re not that keen on big oranges or grapefruit, they don’t like raw onions or leeks. They will eat pretty much anything else; potatoes, bread, cakes, apples, pears, they love bananas. Anything you want to throw in for them, like insurance salesmen. Anything you can get your hands on.

K: I’d like to see that! How would you say your perception of pigs has changed since you started caring for them?

P: I guess, when we first started getting pigs, I was new to veganism. Are you vegan or are you not?

K: I am, yeah.

P: I only went vegetarian in my 20s and went vegan after that, probably in my 30s. I’ve only been vegan about 20 years I suppose. I don’t suppose my attitude has changed that much, I always thought they were nice animals. I know they’re clean, people think pigs are dirty, they’re not. If they’ve got a smaller area they will go to the toilet in the same place, but when they’re in a big field it doesn’t matter so much. In a small stable they will have a toilet area. They’re not filthy animals, I like them. You have to be respectful of them, some of our big pigs way 300-400 kilos, they’re big animals. If you’re carrying a bag of feed and they come charging towards you, you need to be careful, they could just bite your leg thinking that it’s the sack of food. If you get a bite off a pig, you’re in trouble. People think pit bulls have a nasty bite, but it’s nothing on a pig. If you think of a pigs jaw. I know people who have been bitten by pigs and ended up in hospital, so you have to show them, and all animals, respect. Whether it’s a pig or a cow, I mean cows do kill quite a few people accidentally because they are so heavy, if they rub up against you and a brick wall you can be crushed. But that’s not pigs, I don’t think my perception has changed that much, I always liked animals, but I realised when I wasn’t vegan I suddenly realised I was being ever so slightly hypocritical.

K: Right. And how do you deal with the loss of a pig when that happens?

P: We deal with a company, a cremation service in this area. So, they come and collect the animals when they pass away, whether it’s a cow or a sheep or a pig, they’ll take them away and cremate them. When we first started cremating them with the horses we used to get the ashes back but we don’t do that anymore because we realised it’s a) three times more expensive to get the ashes back and you’re just going to end up with hundreds and hundreds of boxes of once alive animals so we don’t do that anymore, we just sed them off for cremation. It’s something I usually deal with, you need to get the animal out of the field which you need to do with a tractor and pick up the body and put it somewhere where the lorry can come and put it on the back of there. It’s not a nice part of dealing with animals, but it’s an inevitable part of dealing with animals.

K: How do you feel the other animals in the herd deal with it?

P: You have to be careful of anthropomorphisation as well, people are keen to project their own feelings of what an animals doing. There’s an awful lot of anthropomorphisation that goes on, particularly in the vegan community. People are just like, it’s crazy. “That’s disgusting what that one’s doing, that one is drinking that one’s piss!”. Well that’s what they do, they’re animals! It’s not a problem to them, they’re not people. We are brought up in a different way, apart from some people round here, you wanna come round here! But you know, animals are different. As long as they’ve got food, shelter, and company of their own kind, they’re pretty chilled.

K: Do your pigs have a home for life at the sanctuary or do you consider rehoming?

P: Yeah, no we wouldn’t intentionally rehome animals. We’re pretty much at capacity with the number of animals we’ve got, though we have taken on two racehorses in the last couple of weeks that were going to get put to sleep. I’m trying not to take on any more, this site here I'm on my own. I get occasional volunteers and perhaps the weekend, but most of the time I'm here on my own and I have to make sure I can cope. If people keep saying “can you take this, can you take that”, it’s very tempting to say yes. Then, I can’t, I recognize my own limits. We have about 300 animals on this site, that’s enough, so I don’t get an awful lot of time to do anything else.

K: And what informed the decision not to rehome animals?

P: Basically, because the policy of the sanctuary is that we’re a forever home. A lot of the animals that come to us have already been passed around from pillar to post, so we want to give them consistency, because in an animal’s life, consistency is very important for their mental health, when they know the routine. Routines for animals are very important. Especially older animals, if you keep moving people home to home, they die, they get stressed out. It’s the same with animals. The problem with rehoming, firstly, we don’t have the resources to go and home check, we’re not a big organization. Secondly, once you rehome, you’ve lost control of that animal. The person’s circumstances might change, and they pass it on to someone else, it gets passed on and passed on. So, our policy is to take in animals that no one else wants, or haven’t got any other chance of a home, then we look after them from that point till the moment they pass away.

K: Is it the same with the domestic animals you have?

P: Yeah, we haven’t got that many domestics. Well, I had to let the bulldog go to sleep, she had cancer and had already had two operations. The cancer had come back and gone to her lungs, she just got to the point where she wasn’t breathing properly. So, we’ve only got two dogs now and two cats, so only four domestic animals.

K: Do you feel like you have a different relationship with the domestic animals than the farm animals?

P: Well, the cat sleeps under my duvet, so yeah. The animals who live in your house, you’re gonna get more upset when they go compared to a random chicken you don’t have much of a relationship with. Now, some of the pigs I'm closer to than others, there’s some I see more than others. I’d still be upset when a pig passes away, but the problem is, when you run a sanctuary you can’t just keep breaking down in tears every time an animal passes away. It’s a pretty regular occurrence, over the years we’ve had thousands of animals been and gone. Ones that live in the house, you do have a closer relationship with, like cat’s in the house is either here or on my lap, so by definition you’re going to have a close relationship with your cat or your dog, than a farm animal that lives outside in a field most of it’s life.

K: Okay. To wrap up I'm just going to ask what your favourite part of working with pigs is?

P: Feeding them, I should think.

K: Why’s that?

P: Well, they get very excited when the food comes out, it’s when they are at their happiest when they’re eating. Some can eat for England, you have to be careful how much you give them because they can get too fat. It’s just a question of making sure they look okay. You can’t weigh them, they’re heavy things. But feeding them is the best part. Or playing with them, sometimes when [Flora] wants a belly rub, it’s satisfying for us as well because you can see the animal is enjoying it, you can see their faces, they’re smiling or making little grunting noises, so that’s just for our own satisfaction a bit of pleasure we get back from looking affect them. But it’s not about me, it’s about them really.