

LOWER SHAW FARM NEWSLETTER – a look back at 2020 - if you can bear it.

INTRODUCTION – Do you remember Saturday 12th December, in particular the weather?

It was one of the most glorious days of 2020, a bright blue-skied winter's day. Not a cloud in the sky, no wind, no rain, no snow.

LSF was ready and waiting . . . for what?

On our calendar it said “6pm, Carols by Candlelight”, one of our annual highlights.

We love it!

People come from near and far to decorate the Cowshed, make mince pies and mulled wine, light a big fire, and to celebrate, sing, and be thankful. Some people even hug and kiss. Remember those delightful activities?

But, thanks to Covid19 restrictions, LSF's Carols by Candlelight 2020 was cancelled, for the first time in more than 20 years. Those few of us who were still here, as the farm's keepers and custodians, trudged about the place alone and disconsolate, saying, 'What a wonderful evening this would have been for Carols by Candlelight!'

What cheered us up, in the subsequent days and weeks, were the cards and messages of seasonal greetings that arrived from so many of you. We looked at every one, read every word, and pictured each of you, glad to hear you are well, and longing to see you again. We thank you for writing to us and think of you.

ACTIVITIES Well, usually, this is one of the longest and most detailed parts of our newsletter, as we seek to describe and tell you about events that have taken place at LSF during the year.

But, for 2020, because of you-know-what, there is little about our usual activities to report. We began the year with an optimistic and industrious Working Weekend and by early March, enjoyed welcoming a good crowd for a Yoga and Massage Weekend.

And then, suddenly, on 20th March, everything came to a halt. To comply with Government restrictions to try to slow the spread of Covid19, LSF, along with the rest of the country, went into fast, firm and full lockdown.

But, notwithstanding the disappointments and difficulties that went along with complying with these restrictions, they also proved an ill wind that blew us a little good.





As if to make up for not having any of you, we ended up with most of the cheerful, creative, and ever-industrious partly-homebred Farm Yard Circus crew in what turned out to be long term lockdown. They were great fun and provided life-affirming relief from the coronavirus doldrums.

So, instead of describing our year in categories or sections, as we used to, we now do so in month by month chronological order.



Early in January, Andrea and Matt started the year with a legitimate pre-covid jaunt to the lovely town of Caldes de Monbui in a beautiful spot just north of Barcelona, for a few days with daughter Anna, her man Nil, and his family. With them, we hiked in the Montserrat Mountains, visited the spectacular high-up Montserrat Abbey, ate new and traditional dishes, including perfect paella and roasted pigs' trotters, and enjoyed the communal delight that is a Nit de Reis, a Twelfth Night celebration and procession, which take place in villages, towns and cities throughout Spain. .

In February, as Valentine's Day approached, excitement mounted too. The 14th was to be a big day. A promised new love, to replace a faithful old one, was coming our way.

Mid-morning, a blue battered transit van drove into the yard. The side door slid open and there 'she' was, glossy and shiny in all 'her' legendary claret glory, guaranteed to keep 'her' superb vitreous enamel good looks for many years to come.

Yes, our new Rayburn had arrived, delivered by a man with a van, who used two scaffolding planks and three steel rollers to shift the half ton stove across the yard, down the steps, and into the Dairy, without a hitch. He was a genius at the gentle art of leverage and rolling.

What a beauty! Not the man, or the van, or the planks, or the rollers, but the Rayburn. Quite the best ever Valentine's Day surprise, almost.

Plumber and former resident Colin came along to install it in the Dairy. While he did the pipe work, Matt fitted a chimney flu and soon, we were heating kettles, radiators, and immersion tanks of water from our new stove, our new Dairy 'friend'.

Later in February, still in those halcyon pre-Covid 19 days when one could leave home, hug friends, and visit other countries (this is being written just as Swindon goes from Tier 4 into another national lockdown) Andrea headed off to Morocco, for a long walk in the Zagora Mountains with her sis-in-law Ruthie and other fine women. Yes, they had a good time and returned refreshed and a bit fitter than already fit people can be.

One day, while Andrea was away, there was a sudden commotion among the ducks and hens. A dog, a sturdy little Spaniel, was chasing them, grabbing one here and another there. Chickens were flapping and feathers were flying!

Matt joined the fray and as the Spaniel concentrated on shaking a pretty pullet, he cornered it against the greenhouse. Grabbing it by the collar, he then looked for its name and owner's phone number. When he found it, in order to call the owner, he needed his own phone, which was in the house. Fired up by the taste of poultry blood, the chipper spaniel was not happy being restrained.



So Matt shouted out, hoping some farm resident or other would come to his aid. Instead, a woman came in from the Lane. 'Ah, there he is!' she said. 'He's a really good boy and very obedient. Never gives us any trouble. But your hedge has lots of holes in it. That's how he got in. And, of course, he was tempted by all these chickens running around the place. Hope they're ok. I'll take him now.' And addressing a last remark to the dog, she says, 'Good boy! Come on. Good boy.' . . . and is off. Matt blinks and goes to count the remaining chickens.

At the end of February, a great Catalan tradition, of particular food, drink, and togetherness, was celebrated at LSF. Anna, Nil, and friends brought us a Calcotada,



which all centres round the open air cooking of a type of little green leek-like onion called a calcot. They are barbecued in neat bundles and eaten in a dangle-in-your-mouth kind of way. It was a wonderful party of cooking and camaraderie and on its own, almost a good enough reason for not 'leaving' Europe!

In mid March, our big senior cock of the roost was found in Caravan Alley with his neck bloodied and broken. The fact that it was broad daylight suggests this was another dog attack and not a fox. The Reynard rarely hunts in daytime and is usually more successful at killing and taking away its prey than a domestic dog.

And then, a little later in March, came the announcements, or rather the hesitations and uncertainties, about a new contagious virus. At the time, a key problem it presented us with, and one that now seems a minor one, was whether to go ahead with design and print of 10,000 34-page programmes for the imminent Swindon Spring Festival of Literature and the Arts. Ever optimistic dear reader, we decided to go ahead, to print and be damned.

On 20th March, the world changed, at least in the UK. The word lockdown came into full, frank, and fearful use. Stay home and stay safe was the warning!

In obeying instructions, to stay home, we were lucky not to be home alone. As already mentioned, a significant part of the Farm Yard Circus crew – bright, young, creative, industrious, and sometimes untidy - also ended up in lockdown at LSF and certainly helped keep spirits up, work done, and made sure we had fun.



These young folk, mostly dwelling in Caravan Alley, took over the Centre, and created their own thriving, novel, and even argumentative little community, cooking and cleaning with and for one another; practising their acrobatic routines and live music in the Playbarn, the Cowshed, and, weather-permitting, on the front lawn; making wooden tables and chairs indoors and out; fixing their motorbikes, caravans, and trucks here, there, and everywhere, and organizing zany, challenging, and competitive weekly quiz nights in the Dining Room, sorry, the Stay Inn.

The first quiz was won by the Quaranteam, of course.

And on 26th March, the Farm Yard Circus crew even helped launch the ostensibly-cancelled Swindon Spring Festival of Literature and the Arts, with a brilliant, entertaining, and socially distanced set of musical and physical performances al fresco on the Front Paddock. Of course, no proper human audience was present but the hens, ducks, and ageing sheep loved it!



Come April, we had developed quite a routine way of life with the Caravan Alley crew of Darine, Kat, Casey, Ben, Fergie, Daren, and Jake, plus the Garden Cabin duo of Jess and Tom. We had regular work days, with everyone mucking in, literally, and, with many hands making light work. We got some heavy jobs done: the pond re-dug and re-lined, the woodshed sorted and re-stacked, the Playbarn hammock re-strung, and lots of weeding and garden realignments.

Notwithstanding the national pandemic, LSF felt like it was thriving. By way of doing our bit to help the cause, we even took tables, chairs, tea, nibbles, musical instruments, juggling clubs, and tractor onto Old Shaw Lane to join neighbours to show our support for the hard-pressed NHS.



In April too, we greatly missed the usual LSF-style Easter celebrations. Despite it being a glorious spring, the virus pandemic was as dispiriting for us as it was for the rest of the country, on both a social and personal level.

Andrea's ageing aunt was in unreachable lockdown in a coronavirus-ridden care home; Matt's brother Luke was facing the challenges of a life-threatening illness, being told he only had days or weeks to live; and his older brother John was stranded abroad, also hospitalised with a serious dose of pneumonia. All of us were beginning to feel the Covid19 struggles of the world weighing on our shoulders too and wondering when this best of times (as you know, LSF can be really lovely in spring, and it was) and worst of times would end. At the time, we thought it would be soon. Now, of course, we all know different.

Come May, it was clear that, not only would all LSF's regular events have to be cancelled but that the same fate was on the cards for the Swindon Festival. We were becoming disconsolate, or at least one person was, until we hit on the idea of salvaging something and doing as much of the Festival as we could online. So we got cracking, with Caravan Alley Kat, Matt, and a host of cooperative authors and performers doing the donkey work and produced a programme of online events. If interested, you can see the results here.

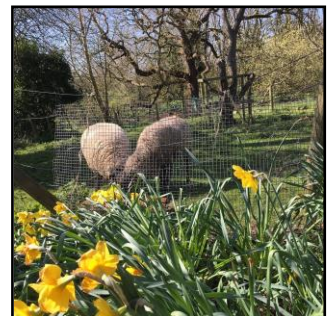
<https://www.swindonspringfestival.co.uk/online-virtual-festival>

As spring turned to summer, and the grass grew and the ground dried, we put our animals out to graze. They loved it. Even the old sheep frolicked and gambolled, stiffly.

After a couple of days, 12-year old ewe Lou began isolating herself from the others, moving more slowly, barely eating, having the runs, and looking thinner. She developed a high temperature and, according to the vet, her bowels were showing no signs of digesting food. She was on the way out said the vet. And soon enough, she went.

Jake and Ben dug a deep parallel-sided grave between the comfrey bed and the wishing tree; Fergie played flute music; Matt read *The Sheep* by Ellis Parker; and we covered her body with earth and wild flowers gathered by Andrea and Darine. The sun shone and Lou the sheep was gone but not forgotten. In fact, Andrea reminded us of how she had arrived at LSF, after being orphaned when dogs killed her mother; and how she would curl up in the ash by the old Rayburn, and on your lap if you let her.

Soon after the loss of Lou, our oldest sheep Daisy, who, at 19 was ancient (world record sheep age is 28) went too, and did so as if by choice. One sunny morning, she hobbled unaided to the bottom garden, had an unusually deep drink from her water bowl and a good helping of finely-chopped veg. Then, she lay down, stretched out in the spring sunshine, and died. She made it look like bliss, the way to go.



Daisy too got the royal burial treatment, a grave to write home about with little inbuilt clay alcove for candles (not fork handles) musical and poetic tributes, and flowers too.

Yes, ok, both sheep got burials that many a human would die for. But they were long term trouble-free ovine friends who brought a lot of joy to residents and visitors alike. They were part of life at LSF and leave good memories.

About this time, late May, the fox was having a field day. In broad daylight he, she, or they took our very best hens and ducks, picking them off daily, and seeming to know which ones were the plumpest or best layers.



Thankfully, at the same time, we were having great success with egg incubations and soon had a horde of chicks and ducklings to replace them.

Early in the morning on 10th June came news we had both feared and expected, that dear brother Luke had died. Deadly leukemic cells had got the better of the life-loving Lukemic ones.

Some of you may have met Luke on his occasional visits to LSF. You may or may not have been aware that, for a number of years, he had courageously and ever-optimistically, been trying to stave off the life-threatening effects of a cancer of the blood and bone marrow.

Luke was a pertinacious go getter, who wanted to make the world better. And a terrific documentary film maker too. His last work, which was completed while he was very ill, is a testament to his will, courage, and determination. It's a film called *Final Account*, a documentary of interviews with the last-living generations of German participants in the Third Reich.

As teenagers, Luke and Matt hitchhiked to Europe together, met new people, discovered life beyond Wiltshire, and argued. And just a few years ago, had yet another adventure, on a great horse ride in the heart of South America, which was full of delights, and still the occasional disagreement. He was a sibling to be reckoned with and a brilliant brother. Now, a light has gone out.

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By mid-summer, Covid19 restrictions had really set in and become a way of life. Even though we were well and our garden was thriving, getting more attention than it ever used to, making it a productive jungle and the yard, a riot of colour, ruled by flower power, since we could no longer welcome sizeable groups to LSF, income was becoming a concern. We needed to find another way to make some money.



Also, we had become aware that there were many local families who had little or no garden and whose children really needed to get out, run, play, and be free. They were, as one mother put it, 'going stir crazy'. And we were also keen to see the farm used.

So, we came up with the idea of offering use of LSF to family and small 'bubble' groups for a few hours each day. When we announced this, we had an instant flood of enquiries, hundreds of them but, what with cleaning and social-distancing regulations, could only offer spaces to two bubble groups per day during June and July, alas nothing like enough to satisfy the scores of requests.

But those who came had great times. It was a joy for us to see children so happy, playing freely outdoors, and parents so grateful. It really was a special and rewarding service to be able to offer but, unfortunately, not a particularly good business model.

So, with Covid19 restrictions relaxing, we extended the 'bubble' service to 2 or 3-day residential stays. They were brilliant too.

One four-person family chose to work rather than play. They enlarged the pond area by taking down one fence and, in a trice, putting up another. And then went on to transform the front garden! Thanks Clare, James, and boys.

Others came, played, and connected to their hearts' content, and then said things like this - 'It was wonderful to have LSF to ourselves. So beautiful and peaceful. Just what we needed.' – 'Perfect, for us to do what we liked, and even have a fire in the evenings. Loved it!'



Result? Happy visitors, happy residents, and a slightly healthier bank balance.

And so summer continued, till, somewhat suddenly, it was November and time for another lockdown. No more bubble groups, no more surprise visitors, no more fun, or not much anyway.

But animal life on the farm continued in its usual way, with births, life, and deaths (One day, a young seemingly-healthy golden cockerel, was found dead by the workshop without a mark on his body. Very mysterious. Could it have been a virus?) and sex.

Yes, because a few days later, Phoebe, our beautiful lamb turned eligible ewe, was taken away in a trailer for sex at another farm. In the hope of creating more little sheep for our diminished flock, she has gone for a serious bit of tugging with a nearby ram. Before James the friendly shepherd drove her away, he said, 'She is too

fat! We'll need to put her on a special diet, to slim her down for successful mating and a good delivery.'

November was rainy, very rainy. We were cheered up in lockdown blues by the release of the Farm Yard Circus interactive video. You can see and enjoy it here <https://www.farmyardcircus.com/projects>



And as the days got shorter and lockdown longer, on winter solstice night no less, to brighten the darkness, we went and got ourselves three little pigs, as one does. Yes, they are six weeks old and cute, inquisitive, and greedy. They like to snuffle your hand, eat with their trotters in the trough, and build themselves straw houses. They really do and are sometimes so well hidden in them that they are hard to find. No bad wolf will blow their straw houses down and if one should try, it would have us to reckon with nearby.



But we have been fortunate to have even more than entertaining acro videos and pretty piglets to brighten our lockdown winter blues. Daughter Anna has announced that she is with child, expected early in May! We are, as you can imagine, super excited, especially as we know, from our good times with Rosa's two year old Otto, how new life, young life, and your own grandchild at that, can put a spring in your step, joy in your heart, and make you see the world anew. We feel blessed, fortunate, and are very grateful.

We hope that you too are well and have plenty for which to be thankful. . .

And now, it's a new year. 2021 is here. What does it hold for all of us? Good cheer, more fear, or an all-clear? Anything's possible. Oh dear.

But either way, here's wishing each and every one of us all or most of what we wish for and what's good for all of us, for our loved ones, and for our one and only world.

We wonder how you marked the start of this new year? Here, at LSF, Tier 4 and lockdown meant we were confined to a sensible socially- distanced party of four. We had a sauna, popped a bottle of mid-European bubbly, and, in minus 2 degrees temperature, under a near-full Cold Moon, round a fire in the yard, chatted, reflected, and even sang '*Till we meet again. . .*' .

So, till we really do, meet again, keep warm, keep well, and in touch.

Wishing you and yours a healthy and happy New Year!

