

LOWER SHAW FARM NEWSLETTER – a look back at 2021, in some respects, not unlike 2020.

INTRODUCTION – Once again, thanks to variants on a virus, our usual climactic end of year Carols by Candlelight event had to be cancelled. With that Greek letter-named infection spreading like a new virus would, it was not deemed sensible to bring scores of people together from far and wide, to crowd into the Cowshed and breath all over one another as they sang their hearts out. We were sad, they were sad, and the farm was quiet.

But very soon we were cheered up by the cards and messages with season's greetings that arrived from so many of you. We looked at every one, usually over breakfast, read every word, pictured each of you, and felt a longing to see you again. Thank you for writing, for remembering us, and for keeping in touch.



FARM LIFE – As you doubtless recall, January last year was a lot colder than it looks like being this year, at least here in the south west of England.

Late January, we woke up one Sunday to several inches of snow. Of course, we had to get the tractor going and the snowboard out. If a little crazy, even dangerous, tractor-towing Ben and Jake up and down Old Shaw Lane was great fun.

That evening, to celebrate the snow, locked in life, poetry, and circus arts, we had a Haggis-stabbing sword-dancing poetry-reading supper. Thanks Robbie B for lending us your night. No wee sleekit timorous beasties we!

Also in January, but in a snow-free part of it, there was a little incident that was part wake-up call, part lucky escape.

And by the way, this is being recounted here not so much for self-pitying or indulgent reasons but more because one of a number of proven therapeutic ways of avoiding post-event trauma and, most importantly, of simply getting over them, is by telling others, who you love and respect, about them, turning trauma into story. After all, as many a wise

woman has said, we are all largely the stories we tell of ourselves. And this is the way LSF resident Matt tells this one.

'As is my early Saturday morning need and want, I'd been on a frosty 5km run in Lydiard Park and was pedalling back to LSF along the usual cycle path, which has some feed-in smaller paths from housing estate to its left.

Suddenly, from behind a hedge down one of these paths, a middle-aged man on a mountain bike appeared at speed, swerved onto the main track and bang, full tilt into me. He went down like sack of potatoes, with a real thud. I was thrown across the path. The two bikes entangled, in full and twisted metallic embrace.

I picked myself up. The man did not. He lay there, completely still, with eyes closed. For a moment, I feared the worst.

I bent down, touched his shoulder, and spoke to him, saying instinctive and what I hoped were helpful things like, 'It's all right. You don't have to move. It's all right. Take it easy.'

Very quickly, half a dozen walkers, runners, and other people had gathered round, asking questions and trying to help.

To everyone's relief, the mountain bike man opened his eyes, and said, 'What happened?' . . . and immediately followed that with, 'Omg. That was my fault. I am sorry mate. Are you all right? That was completely my fault. I am sorry. Are you ok? How is your bike?'

We were all more worried about him than me, because he was still lying on the ground and had appeared to have been out for the count. Anyway, after a few minutes of more reassurances all round and him getting up, we were all on our way, heading off in different directions, pushing bent bikes, bodily shaken but not deterred.



Within a few hours, after adrenalin had worn off, I felt fine. A slightly sore shoulder and little hip ache but nothing serious. My bike was less well and went off for a period in intensive care with brilliant bike doctor Claudio. And a few days later, the man who had crashed in to me, who turned

out to be a very nice man, made contact and offered to pay for repairs.

What do feel about all this? It's great when you crash into nice people but better still if you are not seriously injured. This was yet another 'accident' in my life -- after boyhood donkey fall, knife cut, and bike tumble; teen motorbike and car crashes; and in adulthood, plane stalls, gun hold-up, and falling asleep at the wheel -- out of all of which I have come physically unscathed. So lucky, and so thankful. Now, next challenge: how to avoid catching Covid?'

Talking of catching a virus, also last January, Phoebe, our most beautiful of ewes, went to stay on another farm, with a nice shepherd and his flock. There, as expected, she had a liaison with a handsome ram and was soon happily with twins, something that promised to bring us baby ovine joy in spring, something to lift the Covid lockdown blues. As her gestation period progressed, Phoebe looked fit and well. But one day, she caught a cold, a virus-driven one, which became pneumonia. She was given medication, got plenty of tlc, and even had a visit from the vet but all to no avail. Within days, Phoebe lay down and died and her expected twins went with her.

But shepherds are good people and this one came up with an idea. 'In a flock of hundreds, there is always an orphan lamb or two.' he promised. Sure enough, by late March he was proven right. One of his ewes had triplets, one too many for her two teats. Another rejected one of her offspring and a fox tried to eat it. Thankfully, both were rescued and brought to LSF. They lived mostly on the front lawn, got lots of attention from children on their way to school, and were named Bella and Willow.

Now, they are full grown sheep but remain friendly, happy, and a delight to look after. Like Mary's little lamb, they are happy to follow us everywhere; one day, even to the shop!



Not so easy to look after are the three ex-piglets, now great greedy porcine creatures, who'll push anything or anyone out of the way in their search for food. By the end of the year, we'd intended to take them to the place where big piggies get transformed into bacon and sausages. But, lucky for them, though fit and well, they were deemed 'not yet fat enough'. 'They are perfectly fit and healthy' said Emily the expert pig woman, 'but they look more like greyhounds than pigs. They need to be much fatter!' So now, wallowing in the well-being of their reprieve, three fit pigs continue to eat us out of house and home and fill the farm with an inescapable pig pong.



Thankfully, the hens and ducks do no such things. They remain a reassuring presence, going about their daily routines of laying, feeding, and preening in a way that makes you feel all is well in the world, even when it is not. (To help prevent the spread of the highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1, ie. bird flu, the Government's Animal and Plant Health Agency has requested all poultry be kept in or under cover. In other words, for the time being, no more free-ranging, pecking along hedgerows, and scratching up dust baths for our feathered flock.)

Talking of virulent viruses, restrictions on gatherings to help keep the spread of Covid19 at bay has meant that, during the past year, our courses and holiday breaks have only been happening on a very restricted basis. For most of the year, the farm has had more pigeon visitors than human ones.

At the end of June, we were able to have our first voluntary working weekend in 18 months. What a joy it was to work together, eat together, and be chatting together at LSF once again.



And in August we had a wonderful Family Activities Week, which saw the inception of a brand new activity, a magical one at that. Pure alchemy!

There we were one evening, sitting round the yard fire, when along came Vicky Hirsch with an empty Tate & Lyle golden syrup tin into which she packed cut and dried willow sticks, put the lid on, punctured a few holes in it and placed the tin, upright and carefully, in the fire.

We sat, and watched. Within a few minutes, steam came out of the holes. Next, the steam turned to blue flames, like flames from a gas ring. When these died down, the tin was removed from the fire, covered with fine sand and a little wait began. Next, to cool the tin further, it was placed in a bowl of water but with none getting in through the holes. Minutes later, the lid was prised off. There, inside, was a neat stack of black charcoal 'pencils'.

We each took one and found something on which to draw or write. What a joy, to create words and pictures with an ex-willow stick that was now like the softest and darkest pencil ever. A truly magical feeling. Thank you Vicky!

Magical too was another new activity: obstacle races, round a course designed by the little ones but suitable for all ages to race round and look desperate and silly. Terrific fun!

Fun too has been welcoming a variety of groups running their own courses. They filled the farm with a creative and positive energy. We have had fabulous music and singing weekends run by the brilliant Singing Mamas and super Susie Ro; as well as very well-run non-violent communication and counselling courses.

Our last event of the year was Autumn Arts and Crafts at which, among other things, we carved pumpkins, made clay gargoyles and marzipan skeletons, and a created a stupendous fire sculpture.

And then, before you knew it, December was upon us, and Storm Arwen too, which brought down a few branches – but was quickly gone and suddenly, the sun was out, and children were gathering here for another Welly Wednesday, and Darine was hula hooping with them in the mid-winter sun.



OUR LIFE – As happens the world over, 2021 also saw both birth and death in our lives.

In mid April, in fact on the Queen's birthday, at 1.27pm, for a fraction of a second, a baby girl – they named her Ella - was the youngest human being on Earth, Anna and Nil the newest parents, and Andrea and Matt the latest grand ones. Feelings of amazement, joy, and gratitude were unconfined. Once again, the world felt new. We hope that Her Maj does not mind sharing her 95th birthday with the birth of our own 'princess'.

Apropos of the more prosaic details, in case you want them, Ella, the first child of our second daughter, arrived smoothly albeit a little early at Oxford's John Radcliffe Hospital, and weighed in at 5.35lbs.

Now, eight months later, Ella has blossomed into a delightful, smiling, wide-eyed, book-loving little person. She's full of life and gives us all great pleasure, except for those times when too wakeful in the middle of the night, say her parents. But maybe that augurs well. She is clearly already fully aware of all that life offers and does not want to sleep through too much of it.



Someone who was definitely aware of all that life offers, who lived and explored it to the full, and was a dear and valued friend to all of us at LSF, was Dr Patrick Harding.

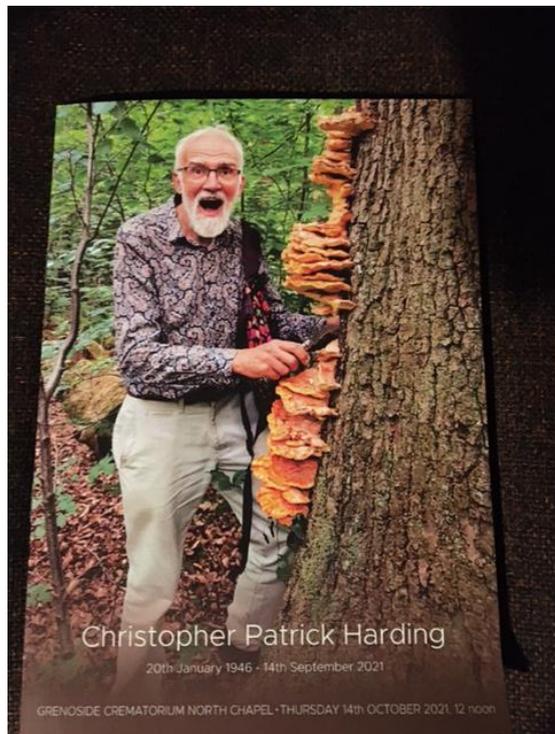
In mid-September, after a period of not being at all well, Patrick died.

For more than three decades, Patrick had been our knowledgeable and fun-loving fungi and flora guru. He led numerous annual and very popular weekend courses here, on perceiving nature, Wiltshire's wildflowers, and most of all, fungus forays to write home about. His magical slide

shows, wonderful walks in the woods, and fabulous fungi fry-ups are legendary.

Patrick really was a natural treasure to us. We are grateful he found LSF, worked with us, and brought Jean and his family too. We loved him, thank him, and miss him.

Note. To honour Patrick and all we learnt from him, we are holding a Mushroom Memories Weekend in October this year. Should be fun!



LIFE GOING ON

Despite the strange times we are all living through, at LSF we are well and have plenty for which to be thankful. We do hope that things are the same for you.

Now, it's a new year. 2022 is here. What does it hold for us? 'Good cheer, more fear, or an all clear?' Those are the very same questions we asked last year, which get the same reply: 'Who knows. Anything's possible. Oh dear.'

But whichever way things go, we wish that this year, you and we all get at least some of what we wish for and what's good for us, for our loved ones, and for our one and only world.

Till we meet again, keep warm and well.

Wishing you and yours a healthy and happy New Year!

Love and best thoughts from us all at Lower Shaw Farm.

