

# LOWER SHAW FARM NEWSLETTER – A LOOK BACK AT 2022

## INTRODUCTION

It's the start of another year, according to the calendar devised by humans to mark the passage of our time. Are you ready for it?

Animals, domestic or wild, seem to take another year, another month, or another day in their stride and make no big deal of it. They prefer to mark time by the seasons, the weather, and food supplies.

But of course, they are mere beasts of the field, lacking our refined sensibilities and the many trappings, trimmings, and titillations of human civilisation. What do they know of yoga, circus skills, poetry, parkrun, and storytelling?

So the courses and events in our 2023 programme are for you, not the animals.



As is this newsletter, which begins by thanking you for the physical and handwritten cards and messages with season's greetings, and some even with news, that arrived from so many of you. With varying degrees of intrigue, we looked at the handwriting on envelopes, sliced them open with no little excitement, looked at every one, whether they contained just a few words or many, pictured and thought of each of you – if briefly - as we read. We look forward to seeing you again, and thank you for writing, for remembering LSF, and for keeping in touch.

## FARM LIFE

Well, beginning at the end, of 2022, after three years of a particular kind of silence, it was a joy to once again be able to hold a live in person Carols by Candlelight event in the deep midwinter. As one delighted parent with excited children, reviewing the event, said, 'For us, Christmas begins here, with Carols by Candlelight at Lower Shaw Farm. When we walk down the Lane, see the candles in jars lighting up your drive way, and then the warm welcome from gloved up helpers by the gate, the crackling log fire in the yard, the hot punch and mince pies on the veranda,

the live and lovely music from smiling musicians, and more twinkling lights in the big cowshed, the magical shadow play, and then, the 'cartloads' of Carols, we know that all is well, even if it is not. We go home cold on the outside but warm inside and know that the festive season has begun' And, we might add, know that, thanks to your entrance fee and other donations, you and all the others have helped raise funds for the homeless at Christmas in Swindon and for the Wiltshire Treehouse project, which provides support for children and young people who have been affected by the death of someone close to them. Even when you are singing songs about new life, joy, and saviours, there's a shadow. Human life, it seems, is like that.



Back at the start of the year, in January, our friends the Farm Yard Circus boys and girls used the big barn for their big trailer build, designing, measuring, welding, sawing, drilling, hammering, and painting for a full fortnight of let's-make-it-ourselves creativity. The result? A circus wagon to write home about, or at rather, to fill up with all manner of farmyard props, including wheelbarrows, tractor tyre, buckets, and even realistic but rubber leeks! It came to look like a beautiful barn on wheels.

A few weeks later, their muscle would have been useful in getting our three smart, strong, and stubborn yearling pigs into a trailer and off to you-know-where. They were, unsurprisingly, not at all keen to go . . . but go they did . . . and a week later came back, more easy to handle, in freezer-size pieces. You might like to know that we do not think we shall keep pigs for this purpose again. Not enough space in this newsletter to tell you why. If interested, ask next time you are here . . . or just guess.

One morning in late February, we woke up to devastation in the hen house. The fox had got in by climbing up rafters, running along roof trusses, and biting through the chicken wire where it was weakest. Boy are these foxes clever, devious, and determined. He killed three of our best layers, one black, one brown, and one golden; and left our feisty white cockerel with a badly injured neck.

But, dear reader, in fox-related matters, it gets worse. Later in spring, the now aptly named Ninja Fox climbed onto the big shed roof, found a weak corrugation, squeezed through a gap and got at the hens from above. Problem, for him, was getting his kill back up through a small hole in the roof. He failed but left the hen house floor littered with five dead birds.



Next, and yes, it does get even worse, he returned late one night and dug a tunnel that came up through the decaying floor boards of the chick house. They, like good babies do, caused a commotion, which Caravan Alley dweller Casey heard, called the poultry keeper. We opened the chick house roof to find a fox cowering in the corner looking very bothered, bewildered, and even afraid. One sharp prod with a shovel and he scarpered and the chicks were once again safe, happy, and ready to go back to sleep.

For the next few weeks, it appeared the foxes had too. There was no sign of them and the chickens were leading a charmed life, enjoying spring.

But the sly vulpines were just fooling us, lulling us into a false sense of security. This time, when they reappeared in mid-June and in broad daylight, they managed to get hold of and kill four of Molly's favourite hand-reared chicks. Oh woe were we.

But we still had a good raft of ducks, one of which, though bred not to go broody, did. But she was let down by her anti-broody breeding. Though she was able to make a very beautiful nest of straw and feathers, she'd forget which eggs

she was meant to be sitting on; she'd go off her nest for too long; she'd roll her own partly-incubated eggs away and drag other newly-laid ones in. And so she went on, messing about but seriously broody for a great deal longer than the required four weeks but alas, sans success.

Could the duck's failure as a broody not just be due to breeding but in part be linked to the very dry weather? Hatching eggs need to maintain a right degree of moisture. But outside the duck house, the Paddock was parched and dry and the grass brown. Use of hose pipes was banned in Swindon. And yet, we still had a glut of tomatoes.

Suddenly it was September. We restocked on hens, a ragged bunch from an indoor rescue centre, where they called them 'Ladies'. Soon our new ladies were enjoying themselves outdoors in the sunshine, free ranging far and wide, and most especially enjoying the famed dust baths round the Playbarn. Very soon too, they were laying like mad.

Not such happy times though for Willow the foundling sheep, who, as a new-born, was bitten round the head by a fox. He came to us with eye injuries. In the long term, these led to blindness and he had great trouble getting about the farm and to and from the pastures. In the end, he had to go where no animal really chooses to go. - But every time we eat lamb, we are very grateful. His grazing partner Bella is alive and well and was showing sheepish signs of broodiness. She waited quite some time for a handsome ram to come her way and share her hay. But none came. So, before she gave up and thought any old ram would do, we took her to visit a friendly and we hope fertile and appropriately respectful ram on a small sheep farm nearby. Fingers, not horns, are crossed.

And then November came and with it, the rain! One day, it poured all day, in horizontal sheets, driven by fierce gusts of wind, one of which did for the big old willow tree by the duck pond. Its trunk split in two, part still rooted and intact, while most of its great branches crashed onto the corral fence. Fallen yet still majestic, it's quite a sight.

## EVENTS LIFE

Great sights, sounds, and experiences too were evident on weekend and other events in '22.

Easter was familiar and fun; the Festival of Literature in May, live for the first time in three years, was brilliant; at the end of May, Circus Skills and Fun was even brilliant.

In August, Family Activities Week, with terrific helpers from Germany, the USA, and Hong Kong, was fabulously creative and productive, with an auction of promises that was a bidders' delight, a hilarious impromptu all-age Cowshed Cabaret, and farewell gift to LSF of a skilfully embroidered graffiti-style plaque. Thanks Alan.

As summer came to an end, Farm Yard Circus came to town. With their mischievous storytelling, dare devil clowning, wicked live music, and super circus skills, they wowed Swindon audiences, many of whom went home singing 'Let's roll the old tractor along . . . Let's roll . . .'







As we moved into autumn, we welcomed new willow weaving tutor Tess, recommended to us by retiring Norah, a super stalwart for so many years. On the basket making weekend, we also had volunteers helping round the farm and on Sunday, a new and special visitor: Andy the detectorist. He wasted no time, got his gear out, and went off detecting. By tea break, he came back to the picnic tables with his haul, all from round or in the dried- up pond. It included bits of horse harness, old paraffin lamps, and a decayed purse but with pristine coins and cards in it. The dates on the bank cards were 1980 and on them the name . . . Victoria R Hirsch! (Yes, Andrea's sister.)

Another very special event at the end of October was Mushroom Memories. Of course, the late and loved Patrick Harding was not there in person but present in spirit as Jean and Martin led a wonderful, informative, and memorable weekend. Mushrooms, of course, were to the fore, and even in the frying pan, but there were moments too to spread portions of Patrick's ashes round the cathedral oak in Savernake Forest and the old apple tree in LSF's lower garden.

## HUMAN LIFE

Back in January, a bunch of fine young women, who were once fine young babies, toddlers, and girls, at LSF, gathered here once again but this time, with babies and toddlers of their own. It was meaningful and moving beyond words to see Rosa, Holly, Meg, and Anna (apologies to anyone reading this who does not know who they are or why this writer is getting so gushy . . just wait) and their various



pretty, poeey, perfect, poeey, delightful offspring back in the farmhouse where 30 odd years ago they were just like that. We hope it was as meaningful for them but maybe harder work too.

In late February, another young woman arrived, smiling from ear to ear. 'I am Molly from Hong Kong' she said. 'I have sold my motor bike (actually a Vespa scooter) and bought a one-way ticket here.'- 'What is you real name?' one particularly pedantic resident asked. 'Chan Yan Yin' she replied ' but you will not say it properly, so Molly will do.' Well, Molly has been a boon. Nine times out of ten, she gets and sees exactly what needs to be done at LSF and seems to take delight in doing daily duties round the farm. Her help is much appreciated and, it appears, her friendship is also valued by visitors. Thankyou Molly.



Also appreciated, by two key residents, are messages from their growing grandchildren. In September they got messages that said that Rosa and Sam's Otto was 4 and two days later asked, 'Am I still four?' At about the same time, messages and pics from Anna and Nil showed that their 18-month old Ella was dancing, dancing, dancing.

On 7th November, there was a storm, followed by a calm evening. The sun set, and a full moon rose in the now-clear dark sky. There followed a still and silent night. Then, as darkness turned to day, a child was born, to Rosa, a baby girl, Inigo May Luna Bloom. A small, beautiful, new human being. Gratitude and joy were unconfined, from Wiltshire to Cornwall and back again

Now, after that, it's a touch tricky to tell you truthful things about ageing grownups. But here goes.

Andrea continues to be at the heart of most practical matters of consequence at LSF, somehow managing to juggle making the best bread rise with making the best flowers bloom, keeping the garden in good growing order while managing event bookings and making sure all things admin are in order. Not surprisingly, she needs a break now



and then and gets it from open air swimming, away trips for serious walking, and regular days with at least one of three gorgeous grandchildren.

Meanwhile, moody Matt hovers somewhere in the background, picking up the pieces, if not quite picking up what everyone says. He fusses about the farm, fretful about little things and unrealistically optimistic about bigger

ones. He thinks it important that everyone gets a proper welcome and is helped to feel good here, even if the roof is leaking. These days, he rarely goes far from home, Oxford, Somerset, and Cornwall being his most distant destinations. Though now that he has discovered satnav, he did manage to find his way to Wimbledon Vets, where he was duly vanquished, and South Wales, where he sliced, spun, and scampered his way to victory in the Over 70s ITF Open Tennis Championships. As a result, on a damp Friday afternoon somewhere near Cardiff, he was presented with a little red plastic dragon perched on a little brown plastic plinth. What a moment!



## MAINTENANCE LIFE

Those of you who have been here in the last year, or two, may have noticed that we have a friendly little roof leak in the alcove by the woodstove. In one sense, it's harmless, providing an occasional trickle of water when the rain is heavy, nothing a couple of strategically placed bowls can't handle. In another sense, it's a bit of a problem, causing both roof and floor to slowly decay but, as one of us likes to say, defensively, 'it's small, sort of sweet, and makes a good story'. But the less romantic among us disagree, so we have sought help from a number of 'experienced' old roofers to fix it . . . but all have failed. There is something exciting about that, don't you think? The mystery of the leaking lean-to. The leak that will not be quelled. It may soon be time to call in the new young roofers!

Another ongoing maintenance job at LSF is changing light bulbs, even the low-energy long-life ones. Well, in the Hayloft, they are high, so very high, and our regular bulb changers are not keen on heights. So, when the Farm Yard Circus crew were here on a jolly, sorry, team meeting and training, we enlisted their help. With little bother but doubtless thanks to plenty of training, a Ben, Jake, and Darine three-high did the bulb-changing job in a jiffy.

## STRANGE LIFE

Do strange things sometimes happen in your life?

Here, one fine summer's day, a half-pound pack of Berkely Farm butter was found in a Blueberry bush in the top garden fruit cage. How weird. How did it get there? No one here knows.

One weekend in November, before Matt had done his early-morning poultry round, a first-time visitor to LSF decided to open the duck house door and let the ducks out. Would you let animals out, at a place you were visiting for the first time, without first checking with their keepers? Hmm.

## GOING-ON LIFE

Well dear reader, if you have got this far sans info overload, well done. You might even like to know that this newsletter is being finished by candlelight and headtorch on a laptop with rapidly dying battery. You see, we are having our third power cut of the week. Apparently, the underground cable that was lain to connect the Lane's new big house to the mains was not . . . erm, big enough to carry the big load. It kept tripping the power station's main switch. Now, workers in hi-viz are digging up the road. They say that a new/cable should be in by midnight. It's 4pm now. So we might be in for an evening by candlelight or an early night, with neither option being entirely unattractive.

But hey, this is a small problem compared to troubled times - nay death and destruction - going on in countries not so very far from here. So we are grateful for all we have and hope that you are in a position to say so too.

Now, it's a new year. 2023 is here. What does it hold for us? Who knows. Almost anything is possible. Asi es la vida.

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

