

LOWER SHAW FARM ANNUAL NEWSLETTER – A RETROSPECTIVE ON 2023

INTRODUCTION



Many thanks to those of you who sent us handwritten cards, with season's greetings, messages, and your news. Whether they contained just a few words or many, we pictured you – if briefly - as we read. Thank you for writing, for remembering LSF, and for keeping in touch.

And now it's January, in a new year. Countless possibilities unfold before us. Have you made resolutions or are you still at the point of re-gifting surplus presents?

We have started the year with two seemingly small but sweetly significant farm improvements: new Roman-numeralled un-wobbly central heating radiator controls throughout the house and - to allow for safer nighttime rope-swinging - a line of colourful lights in the play barn. Both please and uplift us.



Talking of colourful lights, on a blustery night in early December, thanks to a brilliant team of many-age helpers, the driveway, yard, and Cowshed were all a-twinkle for our annual Carols by Candlelight event. High winds had been forecast but we blew them away with bold singing, live music, and hot beverages. It was, as one punter pointed out, 'exactly what it says on the tin: an old-fashioned evening in the farmyard'.

In response to this comment, one inquisitive resident conducted an on-the-spot survey, to see what people understood by the term 'old-fashioned'. One person said

candles are old-fashioned; another said the tractor; a third said live music; another said outside toilets; another, the puddles; a young person said the rope swing; and a cheeky one, when asked what was old-fashioned about LSF, replied, YOU! Well, as you can imagine, the survey stopped there.

FARM LIFE

In early spring, farm friend and tree surgeon Guy and home-bred Jake, both strong, able, and fearless climbers, proceeded, branch by lofty branch, to fell our penultimate giant poplar tree in the bottom garden. Once upon a time, when we first came to LSF, there were twelve big poplar trees round the farm. They were here because, in the early part of the last century, farmers were apparently paid a subsidy by matchstick makers to plant fast-growing poplar. But by the mid-twentieth century, the matchstick magnates found it cheaper to import the right wood from Scandinavia, so farmers were left with huge poplar trees all over the place.

And there was a problem. Once the trees get big, they drop branches and become dangerous for animals and humans below, for which reason you'll not often see poplar trees in public parks. So, sadly, we have had to fell ours, and also, because they were blocking sunlight from key parts of the garden and their roots were threatening to undermine the house foundations. Now we have just one fully-grown poplar tree left, with its dodgy branches safely lopped off.



Earlier in the year, another kind of pruning took place. Caravan Alley dwellers dismantled what we knew as LSF co-founder Dick Kitto's Green Caravan, which, though decaying and past its use by date, was a very sturdy beast, built in times past when they made things to last.

Like the LSF Centre, which was originally built as a breeze block calf shed in the 1940s but since the late 1970s has, among other things, served as dining room, meeting room, yoga studio, Kindergarten, and space for writing workshops and author talks. Sturdy as it is, some of you may have noticed that, behind the woodstove, its roof has developed a leak or two. They are fascinating leaks, not least because they have defied the best efforts to be stopped by a succession of experienced hi viz-wearing sealant-squirting roofers and, when it rains, have happily carried on doing their dripping into a variety of containers below to the somewhat strange delight of one resident, who claims that 'every drip tells a story and probably intrigues our visitors', while another, more sensible resident, reckons that 'every

drip rots the floorboards, mystifies our visitors, and ruins our reputation'. Hmm.

Well, a compromise has been reached. Non-roofers Matt and Fergie took a close look and the latter discovered



that it was precisely the professional roofers' liberally-applied gunge that was causing the problem. Now most of it has been chipped away and we are left with just one spot that, when it rains heavily enough, still provides us with a lovely little leak, a gentle drip . . drip . . . drip into the blue bowl below.

In August, this note was made in the farm diary. 'Never was the garden so bountiful! Green, lush, and amazing. Runner beans to run for and blueberries to eat ice cream with. And as for sunflowers, in garden and yard, they are as high as the highest Farm Yard Circus Two-High!'

EVENTS LIFE

As tradition dictates, our events year started with a winter Working Weekend attended by cheerful and hardy winter-working souls including Claire, Jane, Hamish, Robert, Janet, Elizabeth, Magda, and Pauline, who, appropriately booted and gloved up, joined us in getting garden and farm ready for its spring awakening.



After an early spring Yoga Weekend in March, we got properly into gear with our annual Easter Family Holiday Weekend, which included a zany bonnet parade up the Lane and a wild and windy egg rolling session on the old hill fort slopes of Barbury Castle.



Arts and Crafts took pride of place in April and May, with Textile Crafts and Printmaking sandwiching a brilliant - of course - Swindon Festival of Literature. The latter ended with a surprise announcement at the Festival Finale from its organiser, who said this. 'It is, I think, time for me to hang up my organiser's hat. Time to be sage and keep off the stage. Notwithstanding the fact that running a festival is not the hardest job in the world, not like say, being a king, or harder still, a mother, I have occasionally felt ever-widening cracks appearing in my ageing and formerly impenetrable armour. Things are telling me to slow down, space out, and take my foot off the pedal of a litfest organiser's life.'



However, something has happened, and now he is saying this.

'Apropos of my statement at the last Festival, saying that I would not be organising a festival in 2024, please note that circumstances have changed, as has my mind, for which, though pleased, I apologise, for misleading you, and myself. You see, positive new factors have come into play which mean that, in '24, it looks like I'll still be at the helm, in the festival engine room, even scrubbing the decks, with good help from a kindly crew.

So, happily, and with the promise of terrific authors, artists, performers, and workshops on board, this Festival ship sails on in the sometimes choppy but always culture-cool waters of Swindon.'

Do you ever change your mind, about things that matter? There is an old country saying I've just made up that goes like this. I say aloud what I think to see what I think and when I hear what I think, I often change my mind. That is what appears to have happened here.

Oops. Got distracted there. Back to June '23 at LSF, which began with a great deal of Circus Fun, and carried on with Indigo Dyeing and Wildflower Walking weekends. In August, we threw ourselves into a hugely creative, colourful, and a little combative Summer Activities Week, so by September were ready for the calmer waters of a Women's Weekend and by October, Yoga & Massage, the magic of Mushrooms, and a not too spooky/halloweeny Autumn Families Weekend.

Back in August, we had what turned out to be a remarkable little-big event. Jake and Darine had an idea to offer what they called 'a little Circus Garden party', which promised a couple of hours of seriously funny circus fun with cake, drinks, performance, and workshop. The day before it was due to take place, the weather changed, for the worse, so a message went out to say the event was still going ahead, but not in the Garden, in the Cowshed instead. Under those circumstances, for a new and small event, you'd expect a dozen or two people to show up.

Well, the people came all right, and kept coming. They filled the Play Barn and they filled the Yard. And still they came. We scrambled for more chairs in the crowded Cowshed. And still they came. At the point at which you could not squeeze in another parent or child, we shut the doors and the now indoor 'garden party' began.

You should have guessed it. Instead of being disappointed we were not outside in the sunny (=rainy) garden, the scores of lovely grownups and children were in fabulous and receptive mood, delighted, it seemed, to be indoors watching circus antics. After the show, the children all wanted to have a go with the circus 'toys' spread out before them. It was a truly wonderful circus party . . . but rather bigger and fuller than anyone had expected. Looks like there could be a future for circus skills and fun in Swindon. See <https://www.scoapuk.com/> .



ANIMAL LIFE

In March, following the death of Maggie the pig, we went looking for other porcine partners for lonely Charlie pig, and found rotund and ginger Colin and pretty tubby little Maisie. Really, despite these human-sounding names, they are all just pigs, and behave like pigs, are as greedy as pigs, and could eat, poo, and wee for England.

On the poultry front, we have been severely bird flu threatened and hungry fox-challenged. Because of both, the life of our hens and ducks can now barely be described

as free range. They spend most of their time penned in. On the odd occasions, when we think it safe to let them out, when, say, there are lots of people here making plenty of what we think is fox-scaring noise, we do so and, lo and behold, the wily fox sneaks out from the perimeter undergrowth and woodland (that we have planted!) and snatches a feathered friend or two. Thanks to the recent rains, the ducks have had more time out. They head for the flooded pond and are safe, because foxes do not take to water like ducks do.



HUMAN LIFE

Short and long term wwoofers have been plentiful and delightful and are key not only to keeping LSF going, that is, getting all the jobs done, but also help us be what we like LSF to be: truly international, delightfully diverse, interminably interesting, and wonderfully welcoming. Short-term residents wwoofers and helpers, whom we remember and thank, include Annabelle, Mathilde, Maelle, Pauline, Alban, Virginie, Xavier, Sharon, Eashani, Isabel, Samson, Aisha, Hilary, Una, and two Mars.



Talking of international and helping, our ever-helpful Molly (aka Chan Yan Yin) from Hong Kong, is still here. She is, in one sense, wholly and predictably reliable but in another, also full of surprises. For example, she has created a delightful community of her own, of chatty, friendly, food and fireworks-loving HK expats, many of whom came and celebrated New Year here with . . . you guessed it . . .

fine food and fireworks; and one of whom has made us a beautiful wooden bench.



Two other former stalwart and sometime lively long-term helpers, Maria and Nuria, came all the way from Spain to catch up on LSF joys, jokes, and challenges, and, of course, to help a little bit too. Didn't we chat!

An even longer-term former resident, builder, singer, and fine fixer of broken things, Martin Hawes, brought a bunch of good friends and family to LSF to celebrate his 70th birthday. Being from such a musical family, it was live music that made the night a delight.

On the Hirsch-Holland family front, both those two still resident here and the other three who have long-flown the LSF nest, the news is varied but generally joyful and good, that is to say there is lots for which we are thankful.

Though there was an understandable sadness when, at 91, Andrea's Aunt Dorli came to the end of her life, for which there was not only gratitude but also a mixture of amazement and sorrow at her full story. Andrea and her sister Vicky gave a fascinating account of Dorli's life, how she arrived as a 6-year old in England from Austria via the Kindertransport, ended up living in Cornwall, Sussex, and Harrow, and, sadly, a few weeks after they married, lost the love of her life, her dear husband Bill, to a sudden illness .



Dorli's funeral, with her body wrapped in a handmade felt shroud, covered with bunches of lavender and rosemary, was held at nearby Westmill Woodland Burial Ground, a beautiful spot at the foot of the Downs, where her brother and Andrea's father Hans is also buried.

It was a cloudy December day, but the sun peeped out just as we lowered Dorli's body into the grave, - very close to the graves of farm friend Cathy T and Barbara Yoga. Now, this woodland burial ground has an even more special sense of community and connection for us and for LSF.



On other family fronts, daughter Rosa, she of Rosa Bloom, took her bright and blooming family of Sam, Otto, and Iggy, for work and play, to Bali; while son Jake, after a sunny sojourn in Greece, with his Irish partner Darine, set up a brilliant new project called SCOAP, Swindon Circus

and Outdoor Arts Project; and youngest daughter Anna was kept busy having a second baby, beautiful boy Arlen, sister to Ella, born right on his father Nil's birthday. We love it when they come to see us at LSF, once upon a time their first home but now, rightly, their second.



Andrea, though busy as ever with LSF's many practical matters of consequence, found work-free gaps to have time out in Wales, Cornwall, the Peak District, and Tenerife, mostly walking, sometimes swimming, and most of all, enjoying time with beautiful grandchildren and good friends.

Meanwhile, in Matt, certain carcinogenic cells were found to be misbehaving down below and are now being radioactively zapped. But this strange new condition he finds himself in did not stop him from retaining his title in the over 75s South Wales Tennis Championships; organising another Litfest; pedalling off to his beloved Lydiard parkrun, come rain or shine, where, in May, he reached his 500 runs milestone; and, of course, loving life, work, grandchildren, and people at LSF.

See, there you have it, plenty for which we are thankful.

PERORATION

Well dear reader, if you have got this far sans info overload, well done.

Now, it's a new year. What does it hold for you, and the rest of our wonderful and troubled world? Who knows?

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.

Let's hope we have good health, as much happiness as we need in order to be kind to ourselves and to others, and sufficient prosperity to meet our needs, or even enough to give some away.

Oh, and time too for a little otium (=leisure, ease) which Cicero, that notionally-great Roman rhetorician and writer, reckoned was health-helping and good for us.

Till we meet again, keep warm, keep dry, keep well, and keep in touch.

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

