

LOWER SHAW FARM ANNUAL NEWSLETTER – A RETROSPECTIVE ON 2024

INTRODUCTION



Even though we do not expect them, many of you kindly sent us Christmas cards, with season's greetings, messages, and your own news . . . and we love them! 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.

We have had a great year, with lots for which to be thankful!

The last of our own events in 2024 was Carols by Candlelight. On an unseasonably mild evening in mid-December, a brilliant team of helpers made the Cowshed, the yard, and the drive beautiful, twinkly, and candlelit. Among the scores of people who then came to sip mulled apple juice, warm themselves by the yard fire, ooh and aah at Jessica's brilliant Stick Man shadow play, and, most significantly, sing cartloads of Carols, was a member of one family who said, 'It was almost good enough for us just walking down the candle-lit drive and into the yard. It was magical!'

Responses like this buoyed us up, and set us up for great seasonal celebrations.

But before saying anything about those, there are snippets of a whole year of farm and related life to tell you about. Since we can't tell you everything, it may be best to stick to a few big events and some little ones.

BIG EVENTS

For a quarter of a second, and appropriately, a couple of days before St Patrick's Day, at 7.07pm on Thursday 14th March, a bonny baby boy, both sweet and sturdy, was the youngest person on Earth. Ronan Uisce Flanagan-Holland was born, a son for Irish Darine and Juggler Jake, and another grandchild for Andrea and Matt. We went to see him in the Somerset sunshine and it was love at first sight!

For anyone into time and numbers, in terms of grandchildren, Ronan makes it nought to five in five years. Joy and gratitude are unconfined, plus a little grandchild-minding too. 😊



Another bigish event in late July last year was the appearance of the first fruit on our not-very-big but ten-year old mulberry tree in the bottom of the front garden. Amazing! Hiding behind its big green leaves appeared scores of plump purple berries. And what a taste: sweet, sometimes tangy but always delicious. Mmm! Mulberries to write in newsletter about. You might like to know that one resident grew and quietly cared for the tree for years, while another resident barely noticed it . . . till it bore fruit, and was then overjoyed!

Another memorable event in '24 was the visit in late April, all the way from the USA, of former wonderful wine-making resident Victoria with her philosophical – 'What will you do next? I'll know when the time comes.' – backwoodsman John. It was great to catch up and shoot the breeze with both of them.

In January, before they had a baby, Jake and Darine organised and ran a brilliant circus and outdoor arts conference at LSF. It was attended by creatives from all over the land, bursting with ideas on how to better create, connect, and present circus and outdoor arts for everyone, in a spirit that's very welcome at LSF.

ODD EVENTS

One Sunday in early July, shortly after 9am, a dog ran into LSF and attacked the farm's flock of ducks. It killed two of them, injured another, terrified the rest, and left its little blue chewy ball behind. When its owner was found and approached by a distressed farm resident, he said, 'Oh, sorry about that. We were just walking by and he ran away.' And then wandered off, with his dog still off the lead. The dog was a black and white Staffy type and the owner was a middle-aged man wearing a red jacket, who needs to know that two much-loved domestic ducks are dead because he did not have his dog under control.



On another sunny Sunday morning, early in September, the LSF landline rang and a grumpy voice said, 'My name is John. You don't know me but I live near the farm and I work hard all week and it's a bit much at 8.30 on a Sunday morning, when I'm having my lie-in, to hear children playing in your barn!'

Oh dear. In one sense, one feels for him, working all week and liking a lie-in but what's the world coming to, that someone complains, any day of the week, about the happy sounds of children (3 – 7 yr olds) at play in the morning sunshine. The question is, should weary-adult entitlement to a lie in after 8.30am override the rights of eager children to play?

In late December, a visitor dropped her gold earring down between floorboards in the Paddock Room. 'It is very special' she said. 'It's from my partner. If lost for good, they'll kill me.' (Figure of speech, we trust.)

Recovering said precious item was just the kind of challenge one resident likes. Almost as challenging, exciting, and possibly rewarding, he said, as unblocking drains. And this is the way he told about what happened next.

'With head torch on full beam and a hook made out of garden wire in hand, I shifted the bedside furniture and got down on my knees and pried. (Cf. Searchers' Needles and Pins) And there it was, almost out of sight and reach, with just a small gold bit showing. With trembling hand, I fished, and fished, guiding the little wire hook towards the ring, as if after a cheap prize at a fair. But this one was valuable and mattered. It lay at an un-hookable angle, needed nudging,

a fraction, but not so much as to cause it to shift further in the dusty musty under-floorboards world. Suddenly, the wire was touching gold, and the gleaming ring-thing was hooked. But now, it hung sideways across and below the crack through which it had fallen and needed more careful coaxing to be enticed back up into the room above. Eventually, it did, which greatly pleased its owner. I too was satisfied but less like an earring-lover and more like a monkey who had got an extra special morsel out of a hole in a tree with nothing more than a bendy twig.'



OTHER EVENTS

Of course, our most meaningful bread and butter events are not rescuing fallen earrings or tackling owners of wayward dogs but weekend courses and holidays, either run by us or other people.

Among them was a delightful Easter Weekend at the end of March; a brand-new and brilliant Yoga & Ukulele Weekend in April; an ideas-filled Manuela-attended Swindon Festival of Literature in early May; a brilliant Circus Skills weekend, with most moving cabaret ever, in late May; an energetic Yoga & Running Weekend in July; an informative and memorable Mushroom Memories; regular Welly Wednesdays for local little ones, and big ones too; frequent super-meaningful Singing Mamas Weekends; a new visit from the fine folk of Miknaf Ha'aretz; and in August, a fabulous international Family Activities Week, with participants from France, Italy, and South Africa, and all ages playing lots of games, making lots of puppets, making lots of books, and writing in them, all in wonderful international harmony and launching a brand new Activities Week event intriguingly and mischievously titled Something Quirky at Five Thirty.

ANIMAL EVENTS

In January, there were both big floods and a big freeze. The pond filled up nicely and provided a perfect refuge for the ducks where they could happily dip, dive, wash, and preen safely out of reach of the fox. But in the big freeze, the pond froze over and a wily fox that knew how to skate, did so and caught a drake, that did not.

Amazingly, six months later, in mid-June, even though it was not freezing, temperatures were so low and nights so chilly that, in order to keep warm and the washing dry, we had to re-light the Rayburn.



Back in spring, wwoofers Nim and resident Matt went for an early-morning run. On their return they went to make the daily check on Bella, our lovely pregnant ewe. They shrieked with delight at the sight of two sturdy lambs – one of each gender - and laid-back Bella still licking one of them. The other, alas, was rejected by her. This sometimes happens with the second-born, which seem to come as a not always welcome surprise to a mother fully-focussed on and familiar with her first born.

So, as things turned out, for the first day, we had to hand-milk Bella for drops of colostrum for her second lamb; and, from then on, bottle-feed it too. In fact, mother Bella would have nothing to do with it and, if it came to near her, would butt it away. But it survived, suffering making it stronger, and was loved at least by its sister if not its mother. Family life eh, a tricky business.

To celebrate the birth of the lambs, we ate one of the fiercest cockerels we have ever had at LSF. It even attacked its keeper, violently pecking the hand that fed it. That was its undoing.

We are now sheepless, at least temporarily, because in early December, ewe Bella once again went off for a short but we hope enjoyable and fertile holiday with a couple of rams and a hundred other sheep in a nearby farmer's field. Her spring progeny alas took a less enjoyable journey to our local abattoir. For animals at LSF, life is longer for ducks, hens, pigs, and ewes than it is, alas, for cockerels and lambs.

HUMAN EVENTS

On Sunday 22nd September, at the end of wonderful Women's Weekend, Andrea became a pensioner. However, retirement, it appears, is not an option. Lately, she has been working harder than ever and is expected – by at least one of her fellow residents – to continue doing so for a good few years to come. She did however find time to go see flowers and walk the Dolomites with farm friend and flower-painter Jean in June. Later in the year, Andrea also made a fast long slow train journey across flooded Europe, destination Austria, where she visited her father's home in Velden, Matt's mother's hometown Vienna, and



the home of friend and memorable wwoofers Manuela in Salzburg. On the LSF home front, apart from managing one of LSF's most productive gardening seasons, attending to countless other practical matters of consequence, and lovingly and patiently minding innumerable grandchildren, on the principle of learning and loving life through helping, playing, and doing things, Andrea has also made the brave and exciting decision to get us a new spacious polytunnel, which, we hope, will give LSF even more year-round fresh salads. Watch that garden space!



Meanwhile Matt, after weeks of pills and hormone-changing injections that he hoped would make him more sensitive and nicer but made him more inclined to be grumpy and shed a tear, started the year by completing a month of daily radiotherapy sessions, like having two-hour daily visits to a James Bond set, with green laser beams and big rotating machines, under which you lay, spreadeagled, partially clothed, and precisely positioned as the green light drew a line down your groin. The machines were operated by smiling uniformed workers behind protective glass screens.

Every day, under this remedial high-tech 'torture', he wanted to say, 'No, no, please stop! I'll tell you all you want to know.' But thanks to this invasive treatment, by the end of March his consultant oncologist said, 'Your results are good. The treatment has been successful. Your cancer is stable. No more treatment. Just three-monthly blood tests and monitoring.'

So, as you can prob imagine, Matt is relieved, thankful, nay, over the moon, and feels lucky, and v grateful for support from family and friends, brilliant work by the NHS, and is especially happy that he can still be active at LSF, organise reading, writing, and literature events, run parkrun, and play tennis.



Apropos of LSF-raised offspring, rather than be written about by an ageing parent, Rosa, Jacob, and Anna are now independent and old enough to speak and write for themselves, and may do so if and when you see them. Suffice to say, they are all well, and kept busy by earning a living and looking after and living life with their beautiful families. Even though they all live far from LSF, they do come here, pleasingly often, and we love it when they do. In late May, we actually managed to have a wonderful couple of days with all of them, together, under the sun and stars, in a field in Somerset. And, we also managed to have winter's seasonal celebrations with all of them!

Other long-term LSF resident Molly has been as happily helpful, people-friendly, and initiative-taking as ever. In late November, for a break, she jetted of to Cairo. Two days later, she sent us a pic from her hotel window, of a pyramid!



Longest-term farm friend and herb garden guardian, Marion Paul, came for a special birthday visit in late May. And of course, throughout the year, we had a super succession of WWOOF volunteers,

too numerous and wonderful to mention by name but all signed off in our special helpers' book.

Talking of wonderful wwoofers, in summer, the Editor of WWOOF News asked if we might write something about LSF for them. We did, and it appeared in their August issue. If interested, see <https://org.wwooof.uk/blog/2024/08/01/lower-shaw-farm-loves-wwooofers/>

END EVENTS

Well dear reader, thanks for reading this far, if you have.

It's probably about time we said the thing we'd most like to say to you, and this wonderful if troubled world in which we live.

Here's wishing us all a healthy, happy, and reasonably prosperous New Year!

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. (Amazing, that the latest telescopes now provide evidence that there are two trillion galaxies in the observable universe, which can each take a hundred thousand light years to cross, and have at least four billion stars in each of them. Thank goodness for the one life-giving star we see rise every day and set every night from our own little world.)

Till we meet again, keep well, keep in touch, and may our star keep you sunny and warm... but not too warm.

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

