



Tony's Memoirs

Memories over the last 33 years

No1 - "Early Days in the Smallholding"

"Early Days in the Smallholding"

Cherry phoned me one morning.

"Listen to this" she demanded. "Two trout lakes, its own river frontage, an old Mill".

"Where"? I asked. We had been looking for a home in a more rural area than where we were temporarily living in our first year together.

"Find out as much as you can and ring me back, sounds very interesting."

Less than half an hour later she discovered a four bedroom partially renovated Mill with 10 acres, which was on the market at a price we might be able to afford. She phoned the agent and he asked us to make an appointment directly with the owner. That was ideal.

So, the following morning I phoned the owner and asked when it would be possible to view the property. "Not today, I'm playing golf at 12 o'clock; I'll come back to you" was the reply.

"Don't worry," I said to Cherry, "we'll go now." "But he said it was not convenient" said Cherry.

We arrived and drove down a long heavily banked Cornish lane, covered with pink campions and various small white flowers, lined with a few well-grown oak trees in full green leaf. We were excited.

The Mill was at the end of the lane, in the middle of an open area of field. There was some hard standing in front of the property and an old car parked next to it, obviously the current home of a batch of chickens over lorded by a rather splendid traditional farmyard Cockerel. As we drove up, he announced our arrival with a loud and raucous crowing, chasing his hens into a close bunch.

I left Cherry in the car and went to the front door taking all into account as fast as possible – the stream was fairly low and what could well be described as a bubbling brook. There was

no obvious garden but the area was private and had a quiet appeal away from the ‘madding crowd’. A small grey ‘Fergie’ tractor was parked outside the front door.

A gentleman came to the door in a most agitated manner. “I said I’d phone you” he exclaimed. “oh” I replied innocently, “I thought you said come on over, I am so sorry”. “It is not convenient, I am going out, you will have to come another time” streamed from him.

“Could I just look around some of the fields and your sheds, and maybe the front lakes?” “I’ll go in the house and find my wellies, stay there” he retorted, clearly quite angry by now. I have never been easily put off by anybody or anything and some would say I have quite a thick skin when compared to a Hippopotamus. Naughtily, I followed him into the hall looking everywhere and taking all I could in glances, then into the living area. He turned around angrily “I said stay outside.” “I’m so sorry,” I said, “I thought you said ‘follow me to get my boots’”.

I followed him out of the Mill and to one of the fields, but by now it did not matter. I made my way back to the car. “You are a devil,” Cherry said.

“You’ll love it, we are due back for a full viewing on Saturday, but you will love it.” And she did.

Most of the description was Estate Agents jargon. The trout lakes were merely scrapes next to the stream that had become severely silted up. Numerous outhouses described in the particulars were: a very old Nissan Hut, a Dutch Barn in total disrepair and an old ramshackle shed made of various lengths of corrugated iron and old doors. This housed 16 ewes in bad weather and when they lambed. Indeed, we would have to learn quickly as we agreed to take over the sheep with the Mill. Although we thought the whole property, the Mill, land and outhouses represented a tremendous opportunity; it was not until years later that my father told us “Well it was derelict when you took it over.” Oddly enough, we never saw it in that way, although over time we did have to reroof the property and replace almost all the windows and doors of the house, and replace all the outhouses plus build a garden around the property. We simply saw it as needing a bit of tender love and care. It always had a wonderful character and we have tried to instil more and more individuality to that character.

Although we agreed to buy the property immediately for the asking price, it was not an easy transaction to complete. It turned out that the current lady and gentleman owners were selling due to separation and going their own ways. He, almost certainly, wanted to sell. But, she most certainly, did not. She did not want to sell up, or move or lose her family of ‘Old Cornish Longwool sheep’.

While in this period of transaction, her beautiful dog had gone off one night on the razzle as she had come into season. She fell for pups. She was a Rough Collie – the traditional ‘Lassie’, but the lady was concerned and not a little ashamed because she did not know who the father was. ‘Lassie’ as we shall call her was such a lady-like and well-mannered dog.

That her owner could not believe that she would go off with any old dog! Only time would tell. We already had a big yellow Labrador called Henry and we agreed to have 2 of Lassie's pups if they could not find good homes. As anybody buying a house knows, it always takes longer than expected and always suffers trials and tribulations. This case was no different. Each firm of Solicitors blamed the other. The gentleman selling phoned me and told me my Solicitor was slowing things down. My Solicitor said the opposite. We arrived at a crisis point. We had first seen the property in July and we were now in early November. I phoned the owners and told them that Cherry and I were in the area that evening and could we pop in to pay for the little 'Fergie' tractor we had also agreed to take, along with the 16 sheep and 2 puppies. Cherry and I arrived with an envelope of notes and a bottle of Sherry. We all sat down and the lady owner poured the Sherries. Cherry then tried to find out why the Solicitors had not got on. It seemed that the lady had not been able to bring herself to sign the documents necessary to move the sale on. I brought out the bundle of notes and took them from the envelope. I handed them to Cherry to hand to the lady who was sitting next to her. You could see the sellers eyes misting and literally counting the notes; £10 for me, £10 for you and so forth. On leaving the house, we now had the logbook to the tractor and a firm date to move in and take over the animals, which would be the 8th of December. Through history minds have been lubricated with varying amounts of alcohol and sometimes a small wad of notes; this transaction proved history was a reliable guide to the future.

Suddenly, after waiting for a date interminably we had much to do in the short period to completion. We fixed a short but enjoyable honeymoon in North Cornwall staying at a marvellous Inn run by an unusual trio of a clergyman, his wife and the life-long friend – an ex steel broker. We enjoyed good food, good wine and good fellowship in a traditional setting, spending our days walking and watching various animals and birds. At a reservoir named 'Crowdy' on Bodmin Moor, we watched enormous numbers of starlings roosting in large fir trees, but not until they had carried out their swirling and cavorting flights in a kaleidoscope of black and white patterns. It was a sight that we always think of as a symbol of our life together and Cherry and I both feel it ranks amongst the great natural history events of the world.

We then moved into our house on the 8th December. It was a dull wet day and broken cardboard cases were placed over the floors of the hallway and living room so as not to ruin the carpeting with muddy feet. Later in the day we fed the sheep. Next came the puppies; the 'Lassie' pups were very like their mother and it was never clear what breed of dog the father was. They were enchanting and looked like little foxes. Henry, our young Labrador had been a fussy eater 'til that point. From then on three bowls were put before the 3 puppies. They all checked each bowl to see if any was more tasty than their own, but quickly realised it was necessary to eat up or lose out. Young Henry quickly caught on and was never fussy again. We would feed them only two meals a day by this time; a bowl of porridge in the morning, which they loved and then more traditional meaty puppy food in the late afternoon. They grew fast and were constant companions to each other and to Cherry and me.

On Saturday, 10th December, Cherry and I drove into Saltash to the Registry Office, where we were married. The mood was humorous and light with expectation. As Cherry had

changed her name a little earlier, by deed poll, the Registrar found it very peculiar that Antony Lawrence Blackler was marrying Cherry Margaret Amber Blackler. The service was followed by a luncheon at a nearby restaurant and then all of the guests came back to our new home, just two days after we had moved in. I suppose the order was slightly unusual; Honeymoon, new house, marriage, but not everybody takes on 16 ewes and 2 more dogs. At the time we wondered if we would ever have a holiday again. We need not have worried.

It had rained hard at night and it was still late winter. We looked out of the bedroom window as it became lighter and we were somewhat stunned; the stream was now a tumultuous river and had broken its banks. Much of our lower field was completely flooded. The water was up to the bottom of a small bridge near to the front of our new home. Having always been living in fairly urban areas, or at best suburbia, Cherry and I were a little concerned. While we were preparing for the day we listened to the local news on television, which was reporting on the local floods and we were clearly not as badly off as some folks who had actually had water in their homes. At the end of the news bulletin, the reader told us the times of high water around the region. For some odd reason I noted that the high tide in Plymouth was about noon.

We went outside and surveyed the area. We were not at all sure how serious it was. We had not expected this as our predecessors had mentioned nothing about floods, but there again why should they?" The rain had ceased and a low winter sun was shining over the floodwaters shimmering in mauves, greens, browns and blues, like oil in part but moving very fast, within and near the banks of the stream. Worst of all the water was moving faster and higher. The noise was amazing compared with the tiny flow of the stream the first time we had seen it back in the previous summer. A soft roar overtook all of the other noises. This continued until about 2 in the afternoon and this was the first time that we realised the coincidence of the tide times and our little stream twenty-five miles inland. Our stream was not in any way tidal but we have been aware since that flood that the water does not start dropping until the tide at the entry of the mighty Tamar starts to turn and 'go out' as it recedes the waters are not backed up and slowly lower. By 4.30pm that afternoon, much of the flood had receded although the stream itself was still roaring and growling. It seems strange that the actual name of this stream and tiny tributary, which leads ultimately to the Tamar, is 'The Lowley Brook'. It was far from a brook that day. Although we keep a wary eye out for heavy rains with high tides, it has never worried us quite as much as that first time.

The day after this, we had visitors and had let the dogs into the fields in order to tire them before our visitors arrived, and the dogs being less likely then to jump on them. We called them in, but all three puppies, Midge (from 'Ring of Brightwater'), Tarka (from 'Tarka the Otter') as we had named the foxy little rough collies and Henry the Labrador, were barking incessantly at something and possibly each other. We could not see why or at what they were barking. We left our visitors and Cherry and I walked over to recover the puppies. We could see it was something large and silver that the dogs were leaning towards and barking at, each dog becoming braver until one puppy was pushed too close to the object and then each would move tail down, back behind the other 2 by turn. As we came nearer, we were utterly amazed to see a large dead salmon. It was in excess of four feet long and although dead, not in a bad overall condition. What this proved of course, was that good-sized

salmon were still coming up the Tamar and ultimately our tiny brook. We had seen trout, bullhead, gudgeon and even lampreys but had thought like most people, that salmon were not coming up to breed. However, they were and still are. The little bullhead is a small fish with well-defined spiny fins and it is very apt as it is also known as 'Miller's thumb' as it is often found in the brooks, leats and Millponds connected with Mills.

In our early days at the Mill, we started to form gardens and enclosed patio areas for the pups to be able to exercise safely between their regular walks. Digging in various areas, we discovered old glass bottles and pottery of all sizes, little green medicine bottles to large cider flagons. Over a period of decade's people used to burn what they could, rot down food and old vegetables for treating vegetable plots, but the solid materials were just thrown in a heap. It was fun hunting through these heaps.

What was not as nice was discovering all kinds of traps. The well-known and nasty gin traps were most prevalent. The problem with these is that they catch all and sundry by trapping a limb and very often the animals died of pain, shock, or both. Foxes will even gnaw a foot off and limp off on 3 legs. We exposed several loop traps; a wide lasso – nasty but not as nasty as gin traps. The worst and most horrifying of all was a tiny pole trap. This was a tiny gin trap placed on top of a pole sunk into the middle of the brook. The prey was the beautiful and now quite rare Kingfisher. The bird would fly up rivers or brooks, alight on this trap, which would deftly catch it and break both legs. The birds would simply die of pain, shock or blood loss or a combination of all three.

Fortunately, these traps are less common, but still used by some unscrupulous gamekeepers. The Kingfisher trap died out as Kingfishers became rarer.

Fortunately, we still have some Kingfishers flying up the brook, usually as the young fly up the river looking for territories after dispersal from their nests and parents. I say nests, these in themselves are unusual. The birds dig a tunnel in the bank of a river, rising into a chamber about a metre from the entrance. The chamber would be pitch black and lined with the regurgitated bones of the fish on which the Kingfishers fed. Five or six, pure white porcelain looking eggs are laid. Three weeks later, young Kingfishers will be flying around almost identically plumaged to their parents, maybe a little paler. They are certainly not birds that nowadays most people would consider killing. Life is hard enough for them.

The amazing fact about the Mill was that I had learned that only a generation before we moved in father, mother and several children had lived totally self-sufficiently. By keeping cows, sheep and chickens they had enough meat, milk and eggs and a large vegetable patch had produced all the vegetables and fruit that they needed. They lived the good life and fed according to the seasons plenty. What they could not grow they could not eat. I do not think it would be possible to be entirely self-sufficient nowadays but, with smaller animals like chickens, geese, traditional breeds of small sheep and even with the tiny Dexter cow, a very good life could be enjoyed, although it would need to be subsidised by outside work. More and more people are enjoying this way of life – then your own eggs, milk, cheese, meat and vegetables do appeal, especially when there are constant scares about the ingredients of the more refined foods we tend to buy these days.

In our time at the Mill, we have tried growing our own but would never call it self-sufficiency. We started with the 16 ewes and therefore the first thing we had to learn very quickly was 'lambing'. The general heading of lambing is synonymous with late nights, early mornings and red eyes. Cherry was determined that this was an area she would concentrate on. After all, she had been a 'special care baby nurse' for 25 years. As she pointed out "They all come out the same way, it couldn't be that different." In order to confirm that view, she joined a 'Lambing Course' at the local Agricultural College. Six teenage boys and three girls were also on the course, mainly from farming families. There was obviously a big difference in age, but Cherry settled in to learn and enjoy and was assimilated into the class easily – maybe due to the fact that she would take in a few cans of lager for lunch times. She learned very quickly that most sheep produce lambs quite naturally and that when complications arise they can be a bit frightening. When three legs are sticking out the back end of a sheep, it may not be one lamb but two. Very carefully, legs have to be sorted back to individual lambs. As in all cases, heads should come out first, so sometimes the whole lamb has to be turned around. All of this must be carried out behind with care for the ewe. Care must be taken to ensure the umbilical cord does not curl around the lamb and possibly even strangle it. All of this, Cherry learned.

On a practical exercise with a veterinary surgeon, Cherry, as the natural 'fall guy' was asked to produce the lamb from a labouring ewe. There did not appear to be anything obvious but, the ewe was very tired and had more or less, given up. Cherry put herself into the position she felt was correct and gingerly felt inside. "What can you feel?" asked the vet. "Lumpy custard" Cherry retorted. "Can you feel anything move?"

"No". Even the ewe was beyond caring. Eventually Cherry pulled out a reasonably sized lamb. Clearly, it had been dead for some time.

The whole class went uncharacteristically quiet. The vet was embarrassed. He quickly turned around to change the presentation indicating that the unexpected was always around the corner. "Sad as this is, it is just part of the job that we always have to get used to" the vet's favourite comment followed and the class muttered under their breath as he started "where you've got livestock, you've got dead stock." He was certainly right. At the end of the class, he had a quiet word with Cherry. "I would have never done that to you – I had no idea the lamb was dead".

Having completed the course with generally more ups than downs, Cherry looked forward to our own ewe's lambing.

As the time grew near, the udders filled and teats became proud. We brought the ewes into the shed we humorously described as the 'lambing shed'. We had divided it into a general area and about six much smaller individual lambing bays. We did the best with what was available. The good thing about these sheep was that they were all hand tame and did not panic when we approached as some flocks do, so there was no potential problem of trampling lambs, at least we suspected no problem.

The first night we stayed up late; nothing happened and eventually we went to bed at about 3am with all the ewes laid down very comfortably, chewing the cud with a look in their eyes that asked what were we doing at that time of night? As soon as I was awake I went out – nothing.

Innocently we waited up night after night. Nothing. When we thought that maybe none of them were in lamb after all, just fat by being fed well, we caught up on our sleep, leaving them very early that particular evening. Next morning there were 2 pairs of perfect lambs, well dry and all four sucking on their mothers. We picked each of them up and sprayed their navels with the ‘mauve spray’ every farmer used. This was to prevent infection entering through where the umbilical cord was connected. Among other things it prevented ‘joint ill’, an infection causing severe swelling in the joints, particularly their ‘knees’ and more easily prevented than cured. We noted we had two boys and two girls and were very excited. It was the usual that followed. A few singles and a trio were born. The singles were all very straightforward. The ewe that was to give birth to the trio did very well with the first two but was all but exhausted after that. At first, she continued contractions but we soon realised that she was going to need help. I looked at Cherry and she at me.

“Well, you have been on the course, see what you can do”, I urged.

She put the ewe in a slightly more comfortable position and after soaping her hand and arms with antiseptic soapy warm water, slipped her hand into the ewe. Nothing seemed particularly wrong. She felt for the nose and then the two tiny front hooves. Holding them together either side of the lambs head, she pulled the third, rather tiny creature into the new world. It coughed and sneezed. Cherry wiped fluid from its nose and rubbed it quickly with dry straw. Although tiny, it was alive, well, and bleated. It looked as if Cherry had learnt the basics on her course. Only once did we have to call the vet. One lamb insisted on coming out back legs first. The vet simply pushed it back, turned it around and brought it out headfirst. It took a little while and it was too difficult for Cherry or me at that time, but we were learning fast. The wonder of new life is unceasing. Every time a tiny creature is born, Cherry and I stare in awe and cannot help thinking that it was a very happy period. We only had the one set of triplets and the ewe looked after them well. Four times a day we fed the last and tiniest some extra milk from a bottle and soon he was almost as big as his siblings were.

Soon we had a sizeable little flock, but quickly realised the problems that occur with sheep. As one old farmer told me, “They just try to die before you get them to the abattoir.”

Not all problems were that serious. The first routine task we learned to carry out was hoof trimming. Just as our nails grow the horny hoof of sheep grow. Some grow faster than others but the softer the ground the more hooves grow and sometimes they suffer a nasty infection commonly called “foot rot.”

Routine trimming is simply cutting a little of the horny material to form naturally flat hooves without any extra growth impeding movement. Sometimes if the growth is excessive the edges of the hooves curve over and underneath the walking part of the hoof. This must be

uncomfortable. Fortunately, cutting and clipping is no more painful than cutting our own nails. On the occasions where “foot rot” is present it is evidenced by a strong, rather cheesy smell hence its name and as such there are occasions when one has to cut quite a lot more than usual trimming and also use an antibiotic spray to clear the infection. It is always rewarding in these cases to see a sheep that was limping quite badly, recover quickly after treatment.

One of the nastiest problems sheep suffer is “maggots.” The main way to prevent this problem is by shearing and dipping. We were always lucky to have a nearby neighbour to shear our sheep, but dipping in a chemical bath or similar treatment is also necessary. The shearer was a delightful man who had a main occupation but, together with his brother, kept a number of sheep as a hobby. He was strong, tough and not an ounce of fat on him. His arms were muscular and showed his thick blue veins. He was made of muscle and sinew. The one thing that always made us smile is that he came to do a hot and sweaty job in a beautifully pressed white shirt. His wife insisted – to do a good job he needed a fine white shirt. He did do a good job.

The neighbouring farmer, Keet, who kept a large flock of sheep, had his own dipping bath system. It consisted of a holding area, then a chute just wide enough for one sheep. This led directly into the bath, which had a graduated entry and then was deep enough so that no part of the sheep could miss the treatment. An equally graduated exit led to a further holding pen for the sheep to shake and dry before being turned out into the field.

This particular neighbour helped us enormously by offering to take our sheep to his farm for dipping. At that time I used to work in the nearby city of Plymouth, but hoped to return early enough to help both catching up the sheep and in the actual dipping procedure.

The next part of the story is as later told to me by Cherry. Our neighbour brought down a large horsebox big enough for our small flock and also his aged sheep dog. The sheep all ran over a small hillock to the farthest corner of the field. Our neighbour sent his dog off to bring the sheep towards the gate where the horsebox was waiting. Whereas most farmers whistle and shout short commands to their dogs, he did neither of these, he merely pointed to the position that he wished the dog to go – his dog was stone deaf and this system has worked on the flat fields where he kept his sheep. However, with hilly fields full of lumps and hillocks, the dog was quickly out of sight and therefore unable to take directions. Keet hated to shout in vain. They had wanted to move the sheep back to his farm as quickly as possible and definitely before I had returned from Plymouth. Apparently, I can be a little over enthusiastic. Eventually, Cherry and Keet managed to bring the sheep over and load and move them back to his farm. In his haste to fetch the sheep and because there were only a few to dip, he was still in a very smart suit in which he had dressed to see his bank manager later in the day.

When I returned home I realised I had missed them by only a few minutes, according to another near neighbour. I went into the house and quickly changed into working clothes, ran out, hopped into the car hoping I would get to Keet’s farm in time to help. I did. I drove up just as the sheep were being unloaded into the holding pen. Cherry took up her position behind the sheep, Keet was standing half way along the bath with a rather unusual tool made to push the sheep’s head under the dipping solution. It was a legal requirement to ensure the

whole animal was covered. And I was there just to help. After about half the animals had gone through and were shaking themselves dry in the far holding pen, one old ewe simply could not be urged through, so I hopped in and picked her up and literally threw her into the middle of the bath absolutely in line with Keet. After my helpful act, I looked up to see Keet with sheep dip dripping off of his head onto his completely drenched 'Bank Manager interview suit'. He was a calm man – not easily upset. I looked up and said, "Oh I'm so sorry." He looked at me as a priest would on a naughty choirboy. Cross he was, but controlled he was more. Cherry said simply "you go back to the Mill and open the gate, we'll bring the sheep back"

Enthusiastic I might be but I recognised her embarrassment and Keet's barely suppressed anger. I drove home quickly. I was ready and waiting for them, a bottle of scotch in my hand which I pushed quietly into his grasp with "thank you, so sorry".

However much care you take, in warm damp weather the great big blue blow flies are looking for somewhere to lay their eggs and they like long damp warm wool where their eggs can hatch in hours to produce flesh eating maggots. They enter the skin underneath the wool and can be difficult to see until you can recognise a slight damp looking smear on the sheep, or if later the sheep has gone off on its own and possible neck stretching to look back over its shoulder. The earlier you can recognise the problem the sooner you can help. The sheep has to be caught, the wool clipped off with hand clippers and the maggots dug out with the points of the clippers. Various contrived mixtures can be poured over the area which make the maggots move but they must be removed completely, not just moved on. When the wound is completely clean an antiseptic spray is used followed by an antibiotic spray. With any luck, the sheep will heal completely. It is necessary to keep an eye out at these times and farmers often refer to warm rainy weather as 'maggoty weather'. When you keep sheep, you know why.

Although you brought the most adorable, harmless, beautiful lambs into the world and, if you can ward off foot rot, get through the dipping and manage to save your sheep from maggots, you will have animals that have grown on well and knocked you down a couple of times out of sheer fun, before you get them to the abattoir. But, every so often, they die for no obvious reason before you get them there. They do the job themselves.

After we had at least a little experience with sheep, we decided we would move onto pigs as well.

At the then Friday market of animals held in the nearest town, Cherry spent an hour or so surveying, with a 'knowing eye' all the animals – particularly the pigs. She also had a quick word with the Auctioneer, expressing an interest in a couple of piglets and because and because she had not been to a stock auction before, asked him for advice. She was told it would be about noon when the pigs were auctioned. She went off to do some shopping and returned at five minutes to noon. By this time the cattle had been sold and all the sheep and the pig auction was just about to start. The Auctioneer had told her that there were 2 piglets on their own in the last stall. Most stalls had 6 to 12 piglets, so only the last stall was

suitable. Patience is not Cherry's middle name and she hopped from leg to leg with excitement while the main body of pigs was sold.

"And now" the Auctioneer started "possibly the best bred, neatest young piglets in the market today, we've not seen pigs like this for months, a couple of Gloucester Old Spots." With that introduction, Cherry was concerned and so shot her hand up when he asked, "Who'll give me £10?"

To her dismay she could not see anybody else bidding. Assuming they were making tiny signs like winking or scratching their beards, she shot her hand up again. "You are bidding against yourself Madam."

The farmers all laughed at the Auctioneer's comment. The reason there were no other bids is that nobody wanted the problem of integrating 2 piglets into a bigger group. Pigs can be nasty to newcomers.

The gavel went down. "You now own the 2 finest pigs in the market, a couple of lovely Gloucester old Spots." Everyone laughed and Cherry now realised everyone there knew she wanted them and as Cornish farmers are, they encouraged her.

She walked up to one rather well built farmer with a twinkle in his eye, who had watched the whole show. "You own a couple of pigs now." He smiled at her. "Have you got any?" she asked.

"Yes I have" he replied. "How many?" she asked. "A couple of thousand". He smiled.

Cherry decided to go back for a coffee and a snack so that she could pick up her pigs when the crowds had died down. When she came back accompanied by my young daughter, she suddenly realised she had not actually considered how to move the pigs home. The only vehicle she had at the time was a Lancia Fulvia, a small two-door sports coupe. She hoped to put them on the backseat.

This was in the days before pig movement licences and horse burger scares, so having opened one car door and parked as near to the stall as possible, she jumped into the stall. The piglets moved as far away from her as possible and kept moving away from her every time she moved toward them. She made a grab for a hind leg. She had read that you could catch a pig by an ear and hind leg in her smallholders Bible. As soon as she grabbed a leg, the piglet started a head-splitting squeal and moved around like an out of control pneumatic drill. Before she could grab an ear, Cherry lost her hold on the hind leg. She tried again and again. She lost her footing and found herself sitting in the middle of the stall. She caught sight of my daughter who was laughing and both were reduced to tears of laughter. "If you're so clever, come and help," Cherry laughed. They both manoeuvred to a position where Cherry could grab a leg and Dru, my daughter would grab an ear and together they could manhandle the little creature into the back seat of my beloved Lancia Fulvia, now covered with a thick layer of newspaper and plastic sheeting. In their efforts to grab a leg and an ear, Cherry grabbed a leg and Dru grabbed an ear. Unfortunately, they both had hold

of a different piglet! All 4 ended up in a bundle, the piglets squealing, and the girls laughing, unable to move. All energy lost, laughing, they recomposed themselves. Ultimately, one piglet, slightly smaller than his sibling was overwhelmed and half carried, half bundled, pushed into the car. The door was slammed. The next problem; “How do you get the second one in without letting the first out of the car?” Both Cherry and Dru pondered.

However, the second piglet had lost a lot of its fight now that it was on its own. Cherry grabbed, Dru opened the door and the piglet was thrown in a little unceremoniously. They looked at each other and quietly realised that a young woman with a little girl had watched the whole episode. They smiled with the kind of smile which spoke aloud “We do this every day, doesn’t everyone?” The woman looked back with a kind smile belied by the tears on her cheeks.

Cherry and Dru now had to open the doors, jump in and close the doors. Somehow, they managed to do this and drove off with 2 piglets looking out of the back window. They did get lots of people gesticulating and staring as the car passed them.

Within a few weeks, there was an advertisement in the local paper exhibiting a fine Lancia Fulvia coupe sports car for sale, smelling overwhelmingly of Dettol but with just an underlying whiff of pig manure.

While they were small, they lived in a small shed with a well-wired five bar gated front. During this period we fenced the area that some years before was an orchard. It had turned into a scrubby, ugly patch with some domesticated raspberry canes that had grown rampantly out of control. We had learned that pigs turn over, refresh and manure the ground on which they live and we hoped that they would do just that to the old orchard. After a hard day of putting in posts and fixing pig wire to, and between them, we stood back to admire our work. Cherry then said to me and a friend called Mike who had been roped in to help, “Why are the gaps at the top of the wire smaller than those at the bottom?” I looked at Mike and he looked back at me. We had fixed, with great care, all the wire the wrong way up. The smaller holes keep piglets in and we had made sure that they could escape easily.

When we finally fixed the last staple on the last stretch of wire on the last post and had fixed a large solid looking gate, correctly wired, we introduced the little piglets. They galloped around almost folding their bodies so that their back hooves hit the spot where their front hooves had been a fraction of a second earlier. They stopped, one galloping into the other, and rolled over in a jumble of limbs and tails. They looked around coyly and immediately recommenced galloping one after the other. They stopped eventually and began to nose the long grass, weeds and raspberry canes. They started to dig the ground and eat worms and roots, beetles and leaves. Another gallop around and they both finally lay down in a great clump of weedy sedge and almost immediately fell into a solid sighing sleep. They settled whole-heartedly into removing every piece of green vegetation over the next six weeks and left only a reasonable sized oak in the middle of the enclosure. This was exactly what we wanted but was a warning of what pigs can do to land if not controlled. From then we had to buy all their food from the farm merchants. We still added various vegetable and fruit peelings, which they loved. They became very tame and we became very fond of them. In

fact, so fond of them that again and again we put off phoning the local abattoir. Pigs are very intelligent and a very pleasant animal to keep. There is a saying in this part of the country and maybe elsewhere “Dogs look up to you, cats look down on you and pigs look you in the eye.” Certainly, they used to place their trotters in the middle of the fence standing on their hind legs to look over the fence, and quickly they did in deed become big enough to look us all in the eye. By now, they were eating us out of house and home and getting bigger and bigger. By now, they were much too big to be porkers for pork or baconers for bacon. Indeed, although we hated the idea, they had to go. But now they were only suitable for pies and sausages, which did not seem very fair. They had taught us an enormous amount about pigs, all by trial and error, getting an awful lot wrong as all budding small holders.

Eventually the dreaded day came when the haulier arrived with his appropriate lorry.

“We’ll only need a bucket of food to move them,” I said confidently. It was true that they would normally simply follow me or Cherry anywhere if we carried a few pignuts in a bucket. I have already said pigs are intelligent and they were. They seemed to know that this particular bucket of food was leading them somewhere they did not wish to go and we also learned that day that the particular breed, the Gloucester Old Spot, was the most stubborn of all. Pigs will do anything that you want them to, that is so long as they want to. And these pigs did not want to leave their heavenly orchard for a piggy heaven. The young haulier used all of his guile and ability to move the pigs. He tried to drive them, persuade them, push them and pull them. There is not a lot to hold onto when dealing with a pig. They have no neck, leads or ropes are useless. Pig boards, large rectangles of plywood are used by professionals to move pigs around, but only when they are trained. You can only hold a pig by an ear or a hind leg. That makes sense when they are small and physically less strong than the handler is. And, they can be moved, but these were incredibly strong. In the end, the haulier, who was a very tough strong young man managed to pull them from the orchard bringing the lorry as close as possible. It took him an hour and a half and he was truly exhausted.

“Next time” he smiled dryly “perhaps we could move them before they are the size of small Hippo’s.” He drove off. Cherry and I looked at each other. “We got that wrong,” she whispered with a tear in her eye.

We realised that although we loved keeping animals, we were very sentimental, not having the farmer’s hard heart. We thought we needed to keep something that we could look after lovingly that would not necessarily end up at the abattoir.

“How about goats” Cherry exclaimed one early morning. “I could milk it and make cheese, and we would not have to send it to market just as we got to know it, understand it and love it.”

Certainly, it seemed a good plan. We enquired in various places and found a place interestingly called ‘Dartmoor Goatel’ run by a lady who bred and sold goats as well as looking after dozens of her own and selling milk and cheese. It was called ‘Goatel’ because she undertook to look after any goats she sold when owners went away from home for

whatever reason; holidays, business or family emergencies. It seemed a nice idea. We took ownership of our first mature black and white Saanen Nanny. It was the standard looking English goat and she seemed to like us immediately. We fell for her too. We took her home in our old trailer. 'Daisy' taught us a lot about goats. She was kind and gentle and loved being fussed over. She stood very still on a small ramp when Cherry milked her. This was Cherry's first opportunity to make a rather pleasant soft cheese. Slowly, Daisy's milk output reduced. We had to ensure the continuation. We therefore had to put her 'in kid'. We could take her back to the Goatel to obtain the use of a stud or we could obtain our own Billy. Inevitably, we looked around to find a suitable husband for Daisy. It turned out to be a good-looking rather rangy goat called Chester. He was very strong and when we tethered him, he would decide whether to stay where we left him. Sometimes he would simply pull up the stake at the end of his chain. He would go over fences and hedges and we often had a trek to find him. This led to a system whereby we stopped chaining him to a stake; instead, we chained him to a very heavy used tyre. He could pull this around his field to his heart's content and we lost him no longer. He was very good at one thing. Just before Daisy ceased her milk output altogether, she looked as though she would burst, she gave birth to 2 mini Chesters. They were a complete physical copy of their father, except for one thing. They were little girls. For about 8 weeks, Cherry did not have the daily chore of milking Daisy. Her kids took care of the milk supply. All too soon, the kids were eating the same as Daisy and Chester. They still enjoyed suckling but mainly for the maternal love it conveyed. Cherry took up the daily milking again and made cheese - as much as we could eat.

Daisy and the kids enjoyed the loveliest of temperaments both to each other and to their human relatives. But Chester was a character.

When Cherry went to chain him to his tyre, he simply followed her lovingly. He stood quite still when she attached the chain to his collar, waited for and thoroughly enjoyed a good rub. He did stink of that harsh male goat odour that ensured a change of clothes before meeting anybody, especially anyone new. But, his clear love for Cherry was such that she put up with it. With me, he was the devil from hell. If I took him to his field, he would run towards me, raise himself a foot off of the ground and then dip his horns hitting me in the shins. However quickly I reacted, he still got me. I held the lead connected to his collar as near to his head as possible, so as to control him better. He would dance all the way to his tyre trying to catch me a sideways blow. Time, and time again he would connect. My leg was permanently bruised during the Chester era.

When I attached the chain to his collar, I would have to carry out this exercise out the very end of his chain otherwise he would turn as quick as a serpent and catch me yet again.

At the end of the day if Cherry went to bring him back to his stable, she would walk up to him and give him a long rub. He would almost dissolve in love and sink to his knees, his eyes glazing over. She would unclip his chain and he would dance and gambol back alongside her, as docile as his 2 kids. If the task fell to me to bring him back, he would rear up, hook me in the ribs and butt me in the shins until I had got a good tight hold on him. It would be a fight all the way. He simply hated me and other males. I have to say his attitude to me was reciprocated. He was a beautiful looking creature, tall, rangy, a lovely coat and a magnificent

pair of horns. All set off by a rather stunning beard. He simply did not like men. He did not like me.

For 30 years, we have enjoyed our goats, latterly pigmy goats, kept to keep the grass under control in one of our larger paddocks. We enjoy these particular creatures. They are mild, even the Billies, with smart coats of black, white, brown and grey in various patterns. Pigmy goats, even males, carry a large stomach, thus looking pregnant at all times. One of our kids lost its mother after only 5 weeks. It was sad to see but we called her Penny and she seemed to be eating enough to survive. Cherry gave her an extra support with a bottle on a regular basis. Although happy, she did grow to the normal size. She was to be a pigmy Pigmy goat. We tagged her ear with a number, quite by chance, 007. She became Miss Moneypenny of James Bond fame. As she was very small, we decided to give her to Newquay Zoo for the farm corner, a pet's corner popular with child visitors. After a couple of days, we received a phone call from the Zoo manager.

“You won't believe this. You know you gave us Miss Moneypenny, the Pigmy goat – she is now 2 goats.” She had had a tiny kid, a little girl that was so small she could fit in a pint glass.

A couple of days later we had another phone call.

“Tony, we have lions, otters, the rarest of pigs and deer from the Philippines. We have meerkats and penguins. What's everybody's favourite? The tiny Miss Moneypenny and the tinier new born pigmy Pigmy goat.”

We now decided to build a Nature Reserve and a Breeding Centre for rare and endangered animals of both Britain and the rest of the world. I had kept a host of animals over the years, mainly rescue's and Cherry was a nurse. What better base to start with? The future was bright.