

# LOWER SHAW FARM ANNUAL NEWSLETTER – A LOOK BACK AT 2025

## INTRODUCTION



This year, 2026, has been designated the National Year of Reading. So here, to help you get started, are a few pages of reading from us.

We have had a great and eventful year, with lots of action and many things for which to be thankful. And we are!

And now, in the end of year days and seasonal break, we reflect on the year's events, wassail the apple trees, and enjoy reading cards and messages many of you sent us. By way of reply, and our way of keeping in touch, we write, illustrate, and send you this newsletter, hoping it helps maintain the meaningful bond between us.

Meaning and bonding was certainly uppermost at our final event of the year, Carols by Candlelight. On a brilliantly bright and still night in mid-December, a fabulous team of weekend 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, cheer Jake's gravity-defying antics, applaud Mary's striking Twelve Days of Christmas illustrations, gasp at Kevin's remarkable note-holding, listen to Rachel's magical storytelling, and, most significantly, sing cartloads of Carols, was one person who said, 'Your drive is amazing, by candle light. So long and well-lit, you could land a plane on it!'

## NEWSFLASH

So, there we were, after the loveliest of Carols events, looking forward to a quiet and relaxing Christmas, with a handful of family and friends.

But one little baby-in-waiting had other ideas. On Christmas Day in the morning, he started nudging Jake's partner Darine, giving her contractions, and the rest of us palpitations. By Boxing Day in the morning, he'd arrived, a beautiful baby boy. Gratitude, relief, and joy were unconfined, and his bigger brother Ronan was pretty pleased too, and with his name, Ezra.



## RETROSPECTIVE - EARLY '25

Looking back to the beginning of 2025, on January 21st, someone who has known and supported LSF since the 1970s, Marion Paul, died. Marion was a regular helper on Working Weekends and a great companion at mealtimes, always happy to have a chat about a good book, a new idea, or how one might help make the world a better place. In her memory, we planted a silver birch in the bottom garden.

In early February, Andrea flew off to walk on Gran Canaria, Molly set off for Cotswold kitchens new, and Bella the sheep came back in lamb from her time away with a local ram.

Towards the end of February, thanks to a cool construction crew, a significant event took place: the new polytunnel went up, sliding doors, paved entrance, and all. Very exciting. It made the first Working Weekend of the year an extra-brilliant one, in a spirit that's very welcome at LSF.



We had Derek on compost; Steve on polytunnel trench and sealing; Dave, Jane, and birthday girl Indiana on Centre decorating; Sophie (New Zealand), Lisa (France), Liz (UK) on coppicing hazel trees; Simon and Inge (Netherlands) on plumbing and fencing; genius James on door handles, gates, lighting, and tractor; Josie & Molly on catering; Andrea on managing the lot; and Matt, hanging about, meaningfully.

It was a wonderful weekend, reminding us how working together on jobs we value in a place we love brings out the best in all of us; and how eating and chatting together is a great reward, esp if rounded off, as it was, by a song or three from John and Jenny. Working weekends don't get much better than that.



One day, Jake came in holding his forehead with blood running down his face. A crowbar had sprung back and cracked him hard, on the head. Matt drove him to A&E where the triage team cleaned, bandaged, and glued him up, and before long, he was back at work on the demolition site. And quite a sight it was too, with piles of scrap metal, cutting equipment, a stump grinder, chipper, digger, and all. A mighty big job it was, with only one year old Ronan loving it all.



By the end of March, we had the first duck egg of the year, always a sign that spring has sprung.

Come mid-April, and we all had fingers crossed that we'd get two little things safely out – Bella's lambs; and one big thing safely in – the very long showman's wagon!

## SPRING '25

In March, one year old Ronan brought his parents to LSF and, by way of prepping to move in, they all had breakfast with us. His father was kept busy demolishing the old bus to make space for his and Darine's showman's wagon, ostensibly to be their new home.



And so it was that on a Sunday morning, down Old Shaw Lane, came Jake's ERF lorry, with a very long load in tow. Getting it down the drive, into the yard, and up the alley, inch by cautious inch, proved to be a remarkable feat of skilful and patient manoeuvring, overcoming multiple hitches along the way and using truck, tractor, and digger to nudge the mighty wagon into place.

We celebrated with a roast supper and champagne and by 10pm were ready for bed, but not before one last check on Bella the bulging sheep. Torchlight revealed her waters had broken. Lambs were on the way, likely within the hour, so not a time to go to bed.

For an hour, Bella's pushings were plentiful, but amounted to no more than a 'to and fro futility', with nothing more than one hoof and one nose emerging. Two hooves were needed, with a nose and head tucked between them, in order for the lamb to 'dive' out of Bella.

After well over an hour of Bella's fruitless pushing and groaning, Matt made a decision.

As described in the poem February 17th by Ted Hughes, he 'felt inside, past the noose of mother-flesh, into the slippery muscled tunnel' feeling for a second hoof, till he found it and, holding both little legs together, and the lamb's nose too, when she pushed, he pulled, in time with her birth-push groans. For five minutes it was a pushing and pulling, more to and fro futility . . . till it came, a meconium-covered lizard-like lamb, a 'long, sudden, yolk-yellow parcel of life in a smoking slither of oils and soups and syrups' but, unlike Hughes' lamb, this lamb lay born, breathing, and alive. And ten minutes later, a smoother exit for a second little beauty. Ah, the relief and joy at new life.

The lambs were still little and cute but big enough to frolic and gambol by the time Easter Weekend arrived in mid-April, and close to 60 human beings, little and large, filled all spaces inside and out at LSF. We had a great time, with bonnet parade and egg rolling on Sunday probably being the highlights, although the newly-hatched chicks, with wild Mallard duckling in their midst, were also quite an attraction.

The duckling came to us via the local vets, where it had been handed in by someone who found it 'wandering about on a main road'. Even though it settled in nicely with the chicks, we expected it to be lured by the call of the wild, once it could fly, and be gone. But no, even though it does go for an occasional fly-about – who knows where? – it always returns at dusk and, not interested in our domestic ducks' house, happily overnights with the hens. It's a delightful duck, that brings an air of serenity to LSF's poultry pecking order proceedings.

At the end of April, the rock of LSF and the Hirsch-Holland tribe, aka Andrea, was diagnosed with a troubling ailment, which required an op and some days in hospital. This was a surprise to all of us as Andrea had been looking and working better than ever and had garden, flowers, and farm in fine shape, not to mention caring for grandchildren too. Subsequent months were worrying, tricky, and certain treatments sticky, knocking Andrea out of her usual productive stride. How did she and we manage? By doing what she/we could and having help from the right people at the right times. We are grateful to them and even more thankful that, on her last hospital visit of the year, Christmas Eve no less, Andrea was given the all clear.

In May, towards the end of a brilliant Festival of Literature, in which one of the organiser's highlights was an evening with Richard Dawkins, Matt ended up in hospital too but with injuries that might have been avoided, had he worn a helmet.



One minute he was cycling out of Lydiard Park on a post-parkrun high, and the next he was in an ambulance with a bloodied head and paramedics attaching heart-monitor stickers to his chest. He remembers nothing but, according to witnesses, when pedalling over a sleeping policeman, he lost control of his '76 Dawes Fox and somersaulted over its handlebars. After seven hours in A&E, he discharged himself (to finish the Festival, of course!) with 'facial abrasions and fractures, and fluid behind one eye' and needing follow up maxillofacial treatment and op option, duly declined. Longterm diagnosis is good, with only likely adverse effect, slight cheekbone distortion and not being able to open mouth as fully as before, which, in his case, may prove to be a good thing.

## SUMMER '25

Midsummer came, rainless and with record high temperatures. At the last Welly Wednesday, children found a baby blackbird, tangled in string, attached to a dead sibling, both fallen from their abandoned nest. Jess and co untangled it and for next few days, Matt, busy as a papa blackbird, collected worms and, using a pair of tweezers, fed it, hourly. After a week of worm collecting and tweezer-feeding, the now bigger baby fledged, and flew!

Throughout summer, thankfully, we had regular and timely help not only from Andrea's Tuesday gardening team but also from a succession of super wwoofers, including the amazing Franco-Hispanic team of Anna, Pau, Remi, Yves; and in October, Becca from Alabama.



In fact, talking of helpers, we were honoured and pleased to be chosen to host a fully-booked WWOOF Taster Day in early October. First step was to hear from each person, their name, why they were interested in wwoofing, and why they chose to come to an outwardly ramshackle smallholding on the outskirts of Swindon. After question time, we headed out for a walk round the farm. In the bottom garden, we had a lucky escape. It was a very windy day. We'd been standing under our oldest heavily-laden apple tree, hearing about the fairy ring that surrounds it; and had just moved on to the horse chestnut tree when there was a great cracking sound. The apple tree's biggest branch came crashing to the ground. If we'd still been there, we'd likely have been well battered by branches and bruised by apples.

Wind and working weekends aside, we also had days to welcome a host of lovely people; to celebrate magical Mary Maguires's 70th birthday; to share in wedding celebrations of Jess and Paris; and to have a visit, and help, from Las Amigas Espanolas, Maria, Nuria, and baby Gael.

By the end of August, after a brilliantly creative Family Activities Week, when the farm fell into that familiar post-event quiet, a hummingbird hawk moth visited us, and, using its long proboscis, fed on yard flowers, happily and undisturbed.

## AUTUMN '25

In early September, there was an unusual occurrence. One very busy week, when Andrea was due in Bristol for a Cancer Conference and Matt in London for a tennis tournament, both our cars broke down and, for a while, we were stranded and frustrated, even forgetting how lucky we are to even have two cars. Good old public transport and car-lending friendship came to our rescue



and, next day, the week was put into perspective when Colin, the ginger pig, who for a couple of days had been unable to stand, departed this mortal coil

By early autumn, even without having wassailed in winter, boughs were hanging low and we had apple and pears galore, piles of them. Two days running, we put two crates of them out on the lane, with help yourself notice, and by the end of each day, they were all gone!

In October, with our poultry stock severely depleted (fanks to f---ing fox) we went to kindly British Hen Welfare Trust (note hen, not chicken = hens lay eggs, chickens get eaten) and got ourselves seven beautiful if boring-brown ex battery hens.

Early December, lambs went to slaughter (keeping farm

animals is fraught with difficult decisions that are a matter of life and death, for the animals, and mixed emotions for the humans) and two new hens did not come home to roost, till a neighbour carried one into our kitchen. He'd found it scratching about near his garden. Immediately, we interrupted our reading to one and a half year old Ronan of *A Fox Went Out on a Chilly Night*, and went looking for other hen, just in time to see a flurry of feathers and fine red fox carrying it away. Doubtless, the little ones chewed on the bones, oh.

Talking of little ones, children have brought us much joy this year, especially our grown up own ones, with their offspring, our gorgeous grandchildren. If you want to know more about them, and us, please come visit us on one of our programmed days, weekends, or weeks in 2026. We'd like that!



Meanwhile, here's a thought for the year. A notionally eminent psychoanalyst says that people who speak or write in cliches are frightened of something; and that imitating famous writers or speaker role models is a sign of fear, of being yourself. He says that if you truly speak as yourself, as you'd like to, with your own voice, what you say or write is unlikely to come out in cliches. He says that proof of this is that neither children nor many old people tend to use cliches. Let's hope this newsletter is some evidence of that.

Well dear reader, if you have read this far, you are a nice and patient person. We thank you for taking the time and having the interest.

Now it's time we stopped talking about our life and thought about yours. So, here's wishing you a healthy, happy, and appropriately prosperous New Year!

Till we meet again, keep well, keep in touch, and may our distant star, with its solar flares, keep you sunny and warm, but our precious planet, not too hot.

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