



Harrowing Times

JANUARY — FEBRUARY 2014

This Issue:

Our members get to grips with pigs, have some trouble with sheep and return to beekeeping.

There is a write up of the last course of 2013 and lists of all the new courses for 2014

New advertisers and smallholding opportunities



Best wishes for 2014 from all at the NSTG!

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Beware of Smiling Sheep

from Richard Barr

In the darkness the sheep were giving me bright white smiles. I smiled back. It was Sunday – traditionally the day when I give my brain a rest. No, ok, let me say it – the day when I give what is left of my brain a rest.

The snow was 4 inches deep. I had been chosen to give the sheep their supper because their owner (my wife Kirsten) had her feet up as she was recovering from a gruelling drive around the M25 in heavy snow. She had gone to Heathrow to collect her bronzed daughter who had arrived back from Australia in a straw hat and sandals, apparently unaware that in crossing the world the outside temperature had dropped from 32° to -2°.

I looked more closely. Could the white really be snow, not teeth? I brushed against a mouth – it was warm. Not snow. Not a smile at all. Then I panicked – ran into the house shouting “Don’t panic, don’t panic the sheep are foaming at the mouth.”

It is an unwritten tenet of sod’s law that if a vet is needed, the animal in question will fall ill at the most inconvenient hour, when the vet is on double or treble time, and when most normal human beings and animals should be asleep.

For the second time in little over a month it happened to us. Inevitably the first was on Christmas day last year when one of the cats was apparently looking a little grey. It was actually a grey cat, but was looking greyer than usual. These things are never easy. The “don’t panic” then was because I saw a rat in the house (our house has more holes in it than gruyere cheese, so rats and other rodents have little difficulty gaining entry), and I decided to feed it – poison. The rat then disappeared and the cat started to look grey. Fearing the worst – that the cat had consumed a poisoned rat, and that it would shortly be for the next world, we raced through dark lanes until we saw a lone glow in the sky. Apart from a few people who had gone overboard for Christmas and had illuminated every radish and Brussels Sprout in their gardens in an excess of festive zeal, we had driven through darkness for many miles.

The glowing all night veterinary centre was full of activity – coping with a guinea pig with laryngitis, a budgerigar with indigestion and now a grey cat that was greyer than usual. At the sight of the vet the cat perked up immediately, was seriously affronted when it had its temperature taken and, as the vet relieved me of £100, spontaneously made a complete recovery.

Beware of Smiling Sheep



A couple of years earlier the sheep had arrived on the scene. Farming is not in my blood, and I never dreamt that one day I would be spending at least part of most days tending sheep.

Kirsten had for years cherished an ambition to have a small flock of Wensleydale Sheep. To me Wensleydale meant cheese. These animals smelt vaguely of Brie that had gone badly off but otherwise bore no resemblance to cheese.

We started with four ewes - sheep with distinctive Rastafarian hairstyles. Apparently 4 sheep do not make a flock and it was not long before they went to Suffolk for a few weeks of pleasure, as a result of which they all came back with coloured markings on their backs to denote that they had been "covered" by a ram whose task it was to "service" a whole flock of sheep.

Then along came the lambs and I converted into assistant midwife, helping in about the same ineffectual way that fathers used to in the days gone by when babies were delivered at home. Pat him on the head and tell him to go and boil a kettle.

For a few months the lambs leaped and gambolled, and every one who saw them breathed "Ahhhh how cute". Then the lambs stopped being lambs and are now fully grown sheep which have absolutely no risk of being turned into chops as they all have names and have become as tame as dogs.

For months the sheep safely grazed and regularly demanded extra food and all was well until....



Beware Smiling Sheep

.....that Sunday night when the sheep chose to smile at me. It would not have been practical to put 12 large Wensleydale sheep into the back of the car and take them to the glowing lights of the all night vet. Besides I did not have the £1200 that it might have cost me.

Looking a little like a past incarnation of Dr Who, the vet arrived and diagnosed that the sheep had been supplementing their diets during a snow storm by eating things they ought not have done in the hedgerows, and that their guts now needed balancing.

What was now required was egg whites and bicarbonate of soda. I don't know if you have ever tried, in freezing cold, to extract egg whites, mix bicarbonate of soda in a bucket and administer it to a dozen foaming sheep. If you have not, I suggest you put it low down on the list of things you would like to do most in 2014. Sheep do not like it, and wrestling with them in the snow on a Sunday night with the Dr Who vet looking on is bad for blood pressure.

The sheep survived, but my advice to you is that if you see your sheep smiling, just smile back because otherwise you are going to need a whole lot of eggs and you will also find your bank balance seriously depleted.



Picture c/o BBC Scotland—Island Blogging