

Jack Smellie was almost an accidental goat keeper but now an enthusiastic one!



THE 'POOR (WO) MAN'S COW

Goats were not top of our list when we were planning our smallholding back in 2009 but a friend whose farm was occasionally used as a RSPCA 'holding area' rang us to say she had been contacted about a couple of goats and were we interested. In her words: 'they would be perfect for

you with your limited space and think of all that milk! Age and breed were unknown but they were supposedly youngish and the current owner was not really coping with them: it turned out to be an issue with tethering and over zealous neighbours!!! The guy was actually quite tearful when he handed them over. I will never forget the day we



Milk and recycling

So why are these brilliant animals at the centre of all we do: well, firstly there is the milk: we don't actually use a lot of milk - except in tea BUT we (the royal 'we' that is) make the most stunning cheese: a cheddar and a soft columnier and then we have huge fun guessing how much an asparagus starter with goats' cheese and salad would cost down at Raymond's or even in posh old Oxford where we lived (on the poor side) for almost 20 years.

The whey from the process gets given to the pigs (though caution is needed here as there is still a fair amount of fat there) and if we get too much milk we have 5 very grateful dogs. Next up is the fact they keep the polytunnel waste to a



minimum: goats don't quite eat anything but Curds in particular will munch her way through most things: even old spicy radish leaves at a push.

I know veg waste can go on the compost heap but it is sooooo much nicer to see it disappear down the mouths of the goats who then reward us with a few extra squeezes of milk the next day. And then they provide the ultimate in recycling with their waste going straight onto the polytunnel beds in the winter to rot down in time for the



The Centre of our holding

Four years on and the goats really are now the centre of our holding: we still have Curds along with her 2 daughters from last year: Cheddar and Gorge; plus Pickle, Whey's daughter from 2011. Whey herself now lives in Devon: her initial character assessment proved to be just a little too accurate as she turned out to be a terrible mum to her triplets, a total diva when it came to milking and then worse, developing into a real bully. I loved her to bits and it took me 6 months to acknowledge that keeping her was no longer an option. Fortunately whilst we had friends who kept mouthing the words 'knackers yard', I advertised her as needing a VERY experienced new owner and the very lovely Zena took her on. I still miss her but she left us with the lovely Pickle who has her mother's confidence and cheekiness but none of the 'devil within her'. And fortunately she is a lot more likely than her mother to win a 'mum of the year' award having brought up fabulous twins this year: Butter and Marg, now living it up close by on a 100-acre farm!



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went to pick them up: back on the holding we had left an almost finished house and almost finished fencing and had driven to collect them in our Saab!!! Yes really!!! (The Volvo would have been infinitely better but was in the garage, another one of those 'best laid plans and all that' moments...). I later discovered that transporting goats in cars is

not considered the best of options and is actually not quite legal. As we approached the paddock where they were, one of the goats walked towards us and one backed off! And that was all it took: we were smitten!! Somehow we hoisted them into the back of the straw-filled car, hastily filled in the paperwork and then drove home, slowly!!!

Curds and Whey as they became known, turned out to be 2 years old, Curds being an AN cross and Whey a Toggenburg. Their characters could not have been more different: Curds was gentle, trusting and calm, Whey a complete madam. They learnt their names and routines, told us on numerous occasions that brambles, ivy and carrots were indeed their preferred choice and on the days when it rained pleaded with us not to even open their door: they really were ok to be left in the barn and could we just fill up their hay rack a little more on our way out!!

spring planting so that come late summer, they can eat all those overgrown cabbage leaves that have only grown so huge due to their fabulous pool!! (Sorry but no smallholding article is complete without mentioning 'poo' at least once).

The best recycling though has to be from our willow coppicing. We planted lots of willow in our first year (all sticks from our own tree) and last year we coppiced for the first time in order to thicken the growth and reduce the heights. The goats went spare as for several weeks we provided them with fresh branches which they then proceeded to strip with huge efficiency. Once they had had their fill, we realised that after a few weeks of drying out we were left with the most perfect kindling for our fire!!! Goats predict the weather, retreating

to their house if rain is imminent; they are enormously affectionate and loyal, they graze 'and' browse so are not too heavy on your pasture, they eat 'brambles' and so can clear your land.

Goat meat is also fab (not that we have progressed down the route of rearing kids for meat yet, it's a slight psychological leap for me) and finally, unless you have a heart of stone, kidding is the most magical and humbling experience. Goats are also quite forgiving if the chickens lay in their hay racks!!!

I could go on but Liz tells me that 1000 words is my limit.. and I am there..... so here's to the smallholder's best friend: after all with 450 million goats worldwide, they have to be doing something right!

