

PIGS IN THE HEATHER

Back in 1814, a gentleman by the name of Robert Henderson wrote in his famous treatise “On The Breeding of Swine”:

“I would recommend it to the inhabitants of these islands [the Hebrides] that they should immediately introduce this stock [swine] into their respective abodes. . . . Nowhere do I know a country so well adapted for rearing swine as the Western Isles, where there are large tracts of pasture lands, in which swine will feed all the summer months among their cattle and sheep, and will resort to the shores and pick up sea-weed and shell fish, which are excellent food for them.”



Back in 2000, Bruno Schroder – uninspired by this work, as he had not, alas, encountered it – invited a number of aristocratic pigs from Cranborne Estate in Dorset to join him in the management of his woodlands on the Isle of Islay, Argyll. The first troupe of pigs did sterling work for Dunlossit, although at times their attentions were slightly too pressing to be beneficial – a serious attempt to root up the lawn at Dunlossit House was not particularly appreciated. Nonetheless, the principle of pig-forestry became well-established as an eco-friendly way to maintain the estate’s woodlands.



Thoughts turned to the recruitment of additional pigs to maintain the work programme, and it seemed good to the management to pursue the concept of renewable energy, not to mention sustainability.

Two promising young boars were flown to the estate in Bruno’s Pilatus PC12 (private flights being much the preferred mode for pig travel). The first of the flying boars – Piggles and Ginger – fulfilled their early promise and the patter of tiny trotters soon enchanted the estate.



At about this same time, serious concerns were being voiced over the frailty of the rare breed pig population. Various petitioners approached Dunlossit and asked whether the privileged island situation could be exploited for the creation of a pig colony which would probably stand a better chance of surviving such scourges as foot-and-mouth, swine fever, and the over-zealous attentions of the ministry bureaucrats whose mission in life seems to be to exterminate small scale – or indeed, any scale – of pig keeping.



And so the Middle White Pig Trust was born: a charity registered in Scotland dedicated to the advancement of knowledge about the breed of the Middle White Pig, and the need to, and method of, ensuring its survival. (And other rare pig breeds – there is no racial prejudice within this organisation.)



For those of you wondering why pigs of varying shape, size, colour and demeanour should be worthy of these attentions, let us explain that:

- the British pig breeds contain something like forty percent of the world's range of pig genes
- experiments show that these traditional breeds have deep – and largely unrecognised – resistance to disease
- the vast range of flavour and texture available in pork has very nearly been lost through standardisation of the industry to the point where two, at the most, three breeds were all that were thought to be appropriate
- these breeds are part of our heritage, and the retroussé snout of the Middle White ranks alongside such icons as St Paul's Cathedral, the Clifton Suspension Bridge and the Kielder Water dam

The trustees of the charity have applied themselves vigorously to their objectives, with notable progress:

- the breeding stock in the Dunlossit herd has expanded to represent no less than five breeds
- pig demonstrations convinced the Forestry Commission of the value of scarification work to the extent where that august body was prepared to grant-aid pig activities



- further experiments (mostly accidental) revealed that the power of the pig could be harnessed to tackle the growing problem of bracken infestation on moorland
- as a result, satellite pig communities have been established in Argyll and further afield which will further stabilise the breed populations



More recently, trustees of MWPT have been instrumental in supporting and encouraging the planning for an abattoir for Islay, capable of slaughtering pigs of all shapes, sizes and colours (nasty rumours that black pigs are to be banned from mainland abattoirs are causing serious consternation in rare breed circles). Cattle and sheep will also be welcome, of course, as they play their own valuable parts in conservation grazing, and similar difficulties are being faced by those who prefer to use slow-maturing native breeds for their land management exercises. This project may not change the face of the world, but in its own small corner it will – to return briefly to 1814 – make it possible that:

“... droves of swine might be sent from these islands”

and there is already such a growing clamour for the taste of heather-fed pork that the prophetic words of Robert Henderson:

“... if there were plenty of swine fed, no doubt markets would soon be established in different districts”

are already being realised: the pig marketeer has repeated requests for heather-fed pork from gourmet restaurants in Edinburgh, London and Campbeltown.



And if you want to do your bit? It is pretty easy, really:

- when you buy pork, look for the name of the breed
- when you eat pork in a restaurant, ask the chef for the name of the breed
- when you visit country shows, ask for directions to the rare breed section
- and above all, start to appreciate the huge variety of pork which is our birthright

Bon appetit!

For more information (or if you are passing – please call in!) contact:

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