

How I got the best bacon in the world (or, an Eejit's guide to beginning with pigs)

Contributed by NickHowe

Self-confessed "accidental pig-keeper" Nick tells the story of how he persuaded his family - and himself - that it would be a good idea to get a few porkers..

I should start by putting this item in context. My situation, requirements, experience and reasoning won't be the same as yours. However, I hope some of them overlap and the experiences I offer are of interest. I've got some land. Not a lot, about 3 acres and most of the time, most of it does nothing much. We bought it because it came with the house. I'd no experience of small-holding, animal keeping, or even maintaining a vegetable plot. It'd be fair to say I'm an accidental pig-keeper. On the plus side, I'd always been vaguely aware and discomforted by industrial farming techniques and everything along the chain from the industrial sty right to the watery, plastic meat sold in most of the High Street. Add to this the fact that I have always been a keen cook and love my food. I want the best tasting stuff. Always.

So, finding myself with a spare paddock, a copy of the River Cottage Cookbook and a desire to eat well, I thought about getting pigs. Pigs are better than most things. They're cheaper and easier to keep than cows (pigs don't get kept, in my plan, over the winter. We have no field water, or shelter). Sheep, even at their most intensively farmed, are decidedly edible and *everyone* tells you that they are lots of hard work. And pigs give you pork. And bacon. And crackling. And sausages. And scratchings. And black pudding. And salami. And ham. And so on. If you could make beer from pigs, I think they'd be perfect organisms.

Having broken the news to my family that not only were we to obtain new animals (we had cats and dogs), but we were going to eat them, I was bought a visit to Pig Paradise to go on the course there, to give me a basic grasp of what to do. This was a Christmas present from my wife and despite her protestations, it struck me that was the permission I needed. What was the worst that could happen? We'd spend a couple of hundred quid and end up with weird pets because we couldn't eat them? They'd get really ill and expensive? These were risks I'd accept to be able to say I'd done it. I'd kept and raised and processed my own food. And it would be the best bacon ever.

Right. So, what breed? Well, some basic hunting on the internet and magazines led me to the conclusion that Oxford Sandy and Blacks would suit me best. They were small (so I *might* win an argument with them, if I ever needed to move them),

they were hardy and promised never to get sick, they weren't bolshy, so the kids wouldn't get ravaged to death by them, they were fairly attractive beasts (those pigs that look like they've been chasing parked cars? No thanks!) and they promised to be great pork and bacon. And stock was available reasonably near and reasonably soon.

We decided (notice I've slipped from 'I' to 'we'?) that I'd build a fenced off area at the very top of the paddock, so any smell wouldn't reach the house, and a hundred quid's worth of posts, wire, hinges and whisky later, Jim, my neighbour, local farmer and Saint had put up an area about 15m x 15m for the porkers to inhabit. A trip to the local scrap yard yielded enough corrugated tin and timber to build a sizeable house for them for under a tenner. A round bale of straw lasted me all year as bedding. I had an old Belfast sink for water and aside from the paperwork, I was pretty much set to go. Getting the paperwork proved the easiest part. DEFRA gave me a registration number for my land quickly and for free, and as soon as this bit of paper arrived, I could ring them for a herd number, again free. A quick trip to the Trading Standards people got me my stock book, so I could record all movements of my herd. On the grounds that I was set to get two pigs, and move them precisely twice, once on, once off, and this would fill out two lines on a single page, they simply tore me out a couple of pages, rather than charge me £20 for a 300 page, 2400 entry book. They also gave me movement forms and explained exactly what I had to do. Frankly, it struck me as a very simple, cheap, intelligent system.

So the day arrived. All I had to do was drive to Brecon and beyond, hand over some cash, sign a form and I'd be a legal pig owner for the first time. My cherry would have been lost and some terrified beasts would become my responsibility. To say I was apprehensive was an understatement. Still, on I went. Three hours after leaving home a carefree, pigless townie, I returned as a Pig Farmer! I was the proud owner of a couple of 8 week old OSBs, one of each sex. Within moments, they were in the paddock, snuffling about, exploring their new home. Feeding and drinking took place within moments, so I felt happy they weren't overly traumatised by their relocation from Wales to England. The kids arrived home from school and rushed up to see the new arrivals, squealing with delight as they ran across the grass. The pigs reciprocated and when noses had been scratched and tails laughed at they fell in love. At that point I knew I'd just bought very expensive pets, but the situation was saved when both kids asked which bits were bacon and when we'd get to try their crackling.

For the next 7 months, the pigs

consumed a daily ration of pig nuts, apples from the orchard and kitchen scraps. Water had to be carried up by the bucket until we bought a bowser and then we could spare loads for them to create a wallow. They grew quickly and became hairy, snuffling brutes. They got checked on at least twice a day and the only preventative maintenance I ever did was a quick check of their temperature by feeling behind their ears. If this felt about right, they ate and drank properly and had no problems with running about with no obvious physical defects, then they were deemed to be OK. It became obvious that these two knew far more about looking after pigs than I did and they got on and grew. They withstood rain, sunshine, small children, the dog running up and down outside their pen, people walking their dogs past stopping and staring, a party of 150 people in the same field, most of whom pointed at his testicles, either marvelling in awe or remaining silent with jealousy, depending on gender and a diet that ran from pig nuts through vegetables to cider apples. And then we had to convert them into food. Apart from a single vet bill of £7, to check they were worm free, there really was nothing else to it.

I'd already been in touch with the local abattoir and been through the paperwork with them. Again, it was really simple and they couldn't have been more helpful, even though I'd only been giving them a minimal amount of business. My only concern was to get it right. I wanted the day to be as smooth as possible. The simple truth was I was going to bring two animals here for the single reason of killing them to fill my belly. I *could* live on vegetables, but I didn't want to. However, I was determined that the price of my continued carnivorism would be the knowledge that I'd been as close to the process of raising and killing of my dinner. And I couldn't do that unless I did it right. I couldn't afford to bugger things up at the slaughterhouse. They were going to have a tough enough day as it was, without me forcing them to hang around longer than necessary. So, at 6am on a dark, cold, rain soaked morning, Saint Jim turned up with his truck and trailer and we set about loading them. All the books and all the experts tell you to load them the night before, let them sleep in the straw in the trailer and have a lie in. So, naturally, we ignored them. 45 minutes of falling over in the mud, the rain and 6 months of pigshit means that next year, we'll do as we're told. Bloody things. That said, the journey was uneventful. At the abattoir, we tagged their ears, handed over the paperwork and returned home. I held my breath when I left them, but honestly, it was surprisingly easy to do. One week and one bill of £110 later, I had 188kg of prime pork in my kitchen, looking for a pan of one sort or another. I'm going to write another article covering that end of things, but it's now March, the paddock is empty and I have 4 more pigs on order. There are salamis and Parma-style hams hanging in the garage, bacon and joints in the freezer and sausages in the fridge.

I've been a pig keeper for 12 months now. It's fun. Really, really fun. After a busy day meeting deadlines, attending meetings and sitting in traffic jams, you come home and throw apples for the pigs to eat. Guess what? They don't

care about budgets, about contra-flows or how we can best outsource and rationalise to maintain steady income streams. They're just glad to see you and I've wasted many hours stood at the top of the paddock relaxing and wondering how I got so lucky. There's masses I don't know, but there's a huge number of people ready to leap in and help, with information, with trucks and trailer, with recipe books when things go wrong. If you've got room (and it doesn't have to be a lot), I'd urge you to go on the course, to speak to other people, and to buy a couple of pigs. What's the worst that could happen?