

*Adventures with a*  
**YORKSHIRE  
VET**



*Lambing Time  
and other Animal Tales*

**JULIAN NORTON**



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## FOREWORD

WHEN I WAS A SMALL BOY, on Sunday evenings at about six o'clock, my family and I would sit down to watch *All Creatures Great and Small* on television. The programme was based on the books of James Herriot, a vet working in rural North Yorkshire in the 1930s. Like so many future vets of my generation, I was captivated. Becoming a vet became my dream.

Some years later, in pursuit of that dream, I arrived at a veterinary practice in the Yorkshire Dales, eager and ready to learn the ropes. I thrust out my hand towards the senior partner, hoping to make a good impression.

"You've got cold hands," the vet bellowed. He was right. I'd just cycled ten miles on my bike without any gloves, through sleet and snow, to spend the first of five days with him and his colleagues.

"Don't take your coat off," he called as he strode out of the office. "We have some cows to see. Plenty of visits to make today, so we'd better crack on. And bring your wellies with you."

Despite my freezing fingers, I felt a surge of excitement as I hurried after him. I was about to get my first taste of what it might be like to be a vet. I remember the various shades of



brown farmyards and cowsheds, and the warm moisture rising from the backs of the housed cattle, all lined up side by side. I can still smell the farmyard too – the breath of the cows, the fruity silage and the sweet hay. And I was mystified and fascinated by the vet as he examined every cow, proclaiming the exact details of the goings-on of each one. *How does he know these things?* I wondered.

But as much as I recall the veterinary skills and the animals' ailments, I mostly remember the people. The farmers, whose weather-worn faces all had their own stories to tell. Of course, every farm animal has someone who cares for them and, some years later, once I'd made it through vet school and out into the world as a veterinary surgeon, I realized that treating an animal was only half the job. It is great fun, endlessly challenging, satisfying and rewarding. But it is the people and their stories that really make the life of a vet extra special.

The ten stories in this book give you a glimpse into the world of both the people and their animals in the part of Yorkshire where I've been lucky enough to have lived and worked. I hope you enjoy these tales and I hope they inspire the same love and understanding of animals that have captivated me since I was a child.

*Julian*



# Poor Pigley!



The little practice nestled under the gentle Yorkshire hills was the place where my veterinary career really began. As a student, I'd dreamt of spending my days working with and helping animals. Now, having passed my exams and graduated from veterinary school, I could, at last, live that dream.

My first couple of weeks at the practice had been particularly busy and it was quickly becoming clear to me that I was going to

have my hands full. Every time I stepped into the waiting room, there were new patients arriving and each one seemed to present a different challenge.

It was another hectic morning at the practice when Pigley the micro-pig arrived. The dogs, cats and rabbits felt quite at ease as they waited their turn to be seen, but Pigley's arrival caused some alarm, because most of the animals had never seen a pig before. They viewed Pigley with fascination and some suspicion.

Pigley quickly made himself at home in the packed waiting room, investigating and snuffling around, sniffing dogs and making small, contented grunting noises to himself. A cat in a basket hissed when he oinked at it, causing him to make a high-pitched squeal.

I chuckled. "Looks like another normal day at the practice," I said to Emmy, my loyal





Jack Russell terrier, who had resumed her new favourite spot in her cosy basket under the reception desk.

At one point, a pug approached Pigley, sniffed him and started barking frantically, his eyes bulging even more than usual. The pug was called Ffion. He was recovering from a broken leg, which I'd repaired with a plate and some screws during my first week at the practice. The round little dog still had a cumbersome blue bandage on his leg, which we were planning to remove during his appointment – my final job before I turned my attention to Pigley.

Usually, farm animals are treated on the farm. It's impossible to bring a cow to the vet's and difficult to fetch a horse, although

occasionally people ride their horse to the surgery and wait in the car park to be seen. But small farm animals – such as baby micro-pigs, lambs or pygmy goats – are portable enough to bring along, just like a dog. Once, I treated a miniature Mediterranean donkey at the practice. It arrived on the back seat of a car!



I headed back into my consulting room, watching Pigley and Ffion through the long, thin window in the door. After a hesitant start, the two sausage-shaped creatures seemed to have struck up an unlikely friendship. Ffion wiggled vigorously from side to side as he tried to wag his tail, but since it was curled in a tight corkscrew, it didn't really wag like a normal dog's tail. Instead, his whole body wagged. When he ventured close to Pigley, he barked and then jumped back, curious but cautious. He repeated the process over and over again, desperate to become friends, but unsure what Pigley was and whether he might attack. *What is this curious creature?* he must have been thinking.

Pigley sniffed at the big blue bandage on Ffion's leg. This was the first pug the pig had ever seen and Pigley was fascinated by

its blue leg. Every time Ffion barked, Pigley grunted, almost causing the astonished pug's eyes to pop out of his head with surprise! Pigs spend most of their time grunting, as they are interested in what's going on around them. They are silent only when they are asleep.

I called Ffion into my room and hoisted him onto the table. Despite everything he had been through at the surgery in recent weeks, he was always pleased to see me. I leant in to stroke his cheery face and he immediately stood on his hind legs, licking my face and ears, as if telling me all about the strange animal he had just encountered in the waiting room. I gently unravelled the bandage. Underneath, the leg looked excellent. The wound was clean and healed, the broken bone now firm and already strong. I smiled to myself. *Not bad for a new vet*, I thought.

“Good news, Ffion,” I said as I popped him back on the floor. “I’ll be able to leave this leg without a bandage on. It’s healing very nicely.” His owners looked delighted. “You should come back for a check-up in two weeks,” I continued. “Take it easy and DON’T jump off the sofa again. Remember, pugs can’t fly!”

Pigley looked as surprised as a pig could be when his new friend emerged from the consulting room with a different-coloured leg. The new one was thinner and no longer blue. Maybe that was why Pigley was anxious when I called for him and his owner, Joyce, to come in. But it wasn’t his leg I’d be looking at. Pigley had a poorly eye.

“Good morning,” said Joyce as she and Pigley stepped into the room. “This is Pigley. He’s just four weeks old. He’s going to be part of our family at Beech Tree Farm.

He lives in the house and has a bed by the large stove in the kitchen. He's very intelligent and clever and sociable, and he'll fit in very well with the other animals. But he has a sore eye that's bothering him. He's rubbing it on the carpet and even squinting. It looks painful."

Joyce was quite right. Pigley's eye was indeed rather sore and it needed sorting out. Treating an infected eye is simple in the case of a dog or a cat or even a guinea pig as they are fairly docile. But when it comes to a pig, the process is much more difficult. Keeping the pesky pig still, so I could examine the eye properly, was the first challenge.

Pigs – even tiny, friendly ones that live in a house and have just befriended a small dog in the waiting room – make a massive fuss about doing things that they don't want to do. They cannot be persuaded. If they are put in

a situation that they don't want to be in, they will squeal and squeal very loudly in protest. The noise is high-pitched and more intense than anything that comes out of the mouth of any other animal.

The volume of the squealing often bears no relation to the degree of discomfort or inconvenience that this pig is experiencing. Whether something terrible has just happened, or whether another pig has just looked at them in slightly the wrong way, the dramatic reaction is the same. I suspected this would be the case with Pigley. I scooped him up from Joyce's arms and carried him, wrapped snugly in a blanket, to the prep area in the middle of the practice, where I could get help from one of the nurses.

"Right, this is Pigley," I started to explain to Lucy the nurse. "He's very friendly and has already made friends with Ffion in the

waiting room. Poor Pigley, he has a sore eye. I need to keep him still, examine it and work out what to do. It won't hurt him, but I'm certain he will make a huge noise, whatever I try. So be prepared."

In some circumstances, people working with pigs even wear ear defenders. Would we need some today? I hoped not. Lucy clutched Pigley firmly. Sure enough, Pigley emitted ear-splitting squeals every time I went near him – before I'd even done anything. The anticipation was more frightening to him than the actual procedure. Squeals echoed around every corner of the practice. Luckily, I couldn't see the reaction of the other animals in the waiting room, or their owners' responses. I just hoped Ffion had already left the building!

"Stay still, Pigley," I implored. "I haven't done anything yet!" It was true. So far, Lucy

was keeping him still – or trying to – as I pointed a small torch into his tiny piggy eye. Eventually, I managed to get a brief glimpse, then apply some special orange-coloured drops to the eye to check for damage. This caused more noises and more complaining from Pigley, even though it was not in the least uncomfortable. I often use these drops for examining eyes. They make everything go orange and I often wonder what a patient must think when their vision completely changes colour.

“Don’t worry, Pigley,” I said. “The orange colour will soon pass. It’s completely normal.”

He shrieked again, unable to understand. After Pigley had got used to the orange drops, and after



we'd stopped shining lights at him, Pigley's noise levels subsided. I used a moist cotton wool swab to gently bathe the area. Even with pleasantly warm water, Pigley screeched and squealed. I wondered what his reaction would have been if the water had been cold. Pigley didn't know how lucky he was.

"Pigley! Shhhhhhh!" we all cried, but Pigley wouldn't shush. The final treatment was some ointment. You can imagine what Pigley thought of that!

Finally, he calmed down and nestled his bullet-shaped head into the crook of Lucy's arm, where it was dark, comfy, warm and safe. The whole noisy process took less than five minutes. Pigley's ordeal was over and he wiggled back to the room where Joyce had been waiting.

"He's all done," I announced. "It went very smoothly, very simply and, contrary to

what you might think judging by the noise level, without any discomfort at all!" I added reassuringly. From her experience with pigs, I knew Joyce believed me, although many of my other patients wouldn't have! "He'll need more treatment each day and it might be better if we do it. He's quite a handful."

Over the next few days, Pigley visited us for more ointment to be applied to his poorly eye. Each time he squealed and squealed but the infection was gradually improving.

After that, Joyce visited the practice every so often with her other animals, and she was always sure to update me on Pigley. He had settled well into his home at Beech Tree Farm. She showed me pictures of him living in the kitchen, in his fluffy bed next to the stove. She told me stories of him lying on her bed upstairs, relaxing and sometimes snoring, or of how he played football in the garden

and thought he was one of the dogs. Of course, Pigley had grown, like all micro-pigs do, because they don't stay tiny for ever, but he was enjoying life as part of the extended family of animals down on the farm.

One morning, Joyce called me out of the blue. I could instantly hear the worry in her voice. "It ... it's Pigley. He ... he's been trodden on by a horse," she stammered, clearly very upset.

My first thought was *How on Earth has that happened? Pigley lives in the kitchen. Has Joyce now got a horse in the kitchen too?* I asked some questions, trying to calm Joyce down and find out more about what had happened.

"One of our horses stood on him by accident. It wasn't her fault – she didn't know he was there. And one of his feet has been really damaged. And what a noise! I can still hear the squeals!"

It turned out that the accident had happened in the field, when Pigley was out for a walk after breakfast. I also found out that Joyce hadn't been able to apply any sort of bandage, because Pigley kept running away and making loud, objecting noises. When he wasn't running away from Joyce, Pigley returned to his bed and tried to rest. His poor foot was bleeding badly. It was very clear that this was an emergency.

"Don't worry. I'm on my way," I said quickly. I gathered a box of bandages, whistled to Emmy and headed out.

I had only been at the practice for a short while and I was still finding my veterinary feet as well as my way around the rolling hills and small farms of North Yorkshire.

Beech Tree Farm was quite a long way away, right at the edge of the Yorkshire Dales. Emmy jiggled about on the front seat of the car as we

drove through the bumpy country lanes and over a few potholes.

“Sorry, Em,” I said as the car bounded along. I rushed as fast as I could, picturing the complete chaos that lay ahead of us. Pigley had reacted dramatically to a very simple and relatively painless procedure when he was just a few weeks old. With something much more painful and without anything to numb the damaged area, he would be inconsolable. I hoped I’d be able to help.

A sorry sight awaited us in the kitchen when we arrived at Joyce’s farm. Two Labradors lay calmly in their own beds under the kitchen table, but Pigley limped around, pushing the affected leg out to the side so he could take weight on the inside of his foot without putting the damaged outer foot on the ground. Pigs, like sheep and cows, have two toes on each foot.

As soon as I walked in, Pigley scuttled as best he could under the table, to hide next to the dogs. I signalled to Emmy to wait by the door, which she did obediently, settling down on the stone floor.

I'm sure Pigley recognized me as the horrible man who had peered into his little eyes only a few weeks ago. He was definitely not going to come and greet me today.

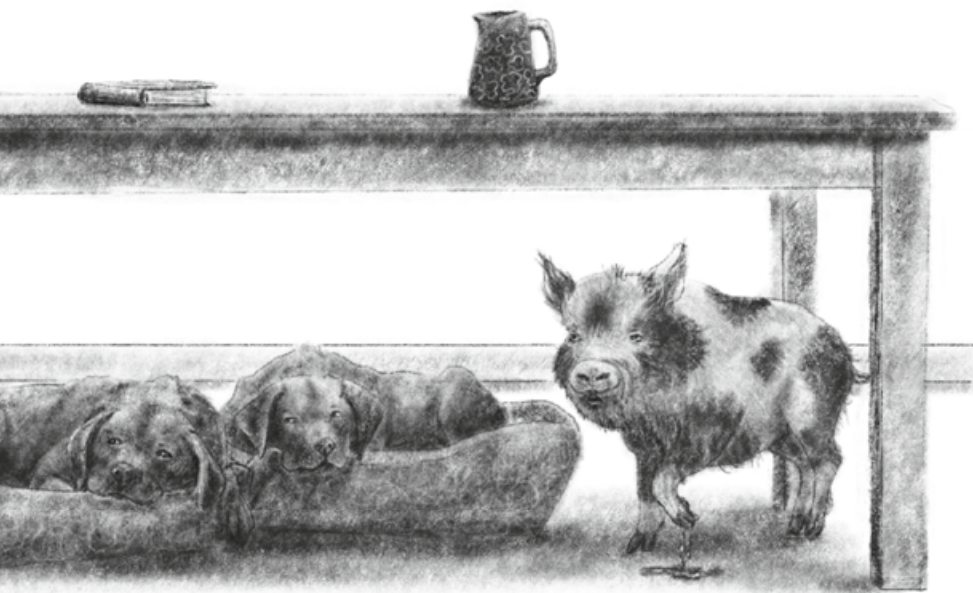
"Hello, Pigley," I said, crouching down. "What's happened to your foot? Are you going to let me have a look at it?"

Pigley was much bigger now and he grunted disapprovingly at me from under the table and stubbornly refused to come out. Even from some distance away, I could see that the foot looked a horrible mess. I immediately knew that I'd have to try and apply a bandage to stop the bleeding and protect the delicate surface. I'd need to keep



Pigley still somehow. I'd learnt from plenty of other patients (though mainly dogs, like Ffion) that applying a bandage to a moving target was almost impossible.

"Joyce, I'll need to put a bandage on Pigley's foot," I explained. "I don't think there will be anything broken – if that was the case, he wouldn't be able to put any weight on it at all. But it must be terribly sore, and we need to stop the bleeding. Can we



tempt him out from under the table and keep him still whilst I apply the bandage?”

“Oh yes. He’ll do anything for an apple, or even a piece of toast,” said Joyce. “And once he’s out, I’m sure he’ll take himself off to his own bed. That’s our best chance,” she added hopefully.

Two slices of bread were placed in the toaster, and we waited. As soon as they popped up, Pigley heard the noise and

sniffed the homely toasted smell. He waddled out, making the happy grunting noise that a hungry pig makes when it thinks food is about to be served.

“Well done, Pigley,” Joyce said, rubbing the bulky pig behind his ears. “Here’s your second breakfast. Why don’t you eat it in bed, you poor thing?”

Sure enough, Pigley carried one of the pieces of toast to his very comfy-looking bed. He chewed it and Joyce quickly offered him the other piece.

“He likes two pieces of toast,” she explained. I half expected them to be smothered in butter and marmalade!

When I was at university, a wise and experienced professor taught us that the secret to success with a pig is to use stealth. Gentle, quiet movements, soothing words, rubs behind the ears or on the tummy

were all good tactics. Sudden movements, surprises, needles, cold water or stingy antiseptic would all cause pig anxiety.

Pigley lay in his bed, sleepy after his toast and relaxed from the warmth of the large kitchen stove. I readied myself with bandages and knelt next to him.

“Good Pigley, what a brave pig,” I said, rubbing his tummy with one hand as I lined up the first layer of bandage material, which was a smooth and protective pad.

Joyce added more encouragement, scratching his ears. I took a deep breath and gently applied the pad over the wound, desperately hoping he wouldn't react and run back under the table. We praised him more loudly as it touched his sore skin. Pigley stayed still and made contented little grunts, so far apparently unaware I was fiddling with his injured foot. Stage one complete!

I had two more layers to apply, so there was still some way to go.

The second layer was a soft cotton wool bandage, which would provide comfort as well as keep the pad in position. This was crucial and often the time when animals might pull away.

“What a good pig!” we both said, getting louder and louder with each turn of the bandage. Pigley seemed to be relishing the compliments and extra fuss. He made no attempt to withdraw his foot, which was nothing short of a miracle. I recalled how violently he’d reacted to my intervention when we’d first met and felt sure he would remember and be totally uncooperative. But in the comfort of his own kitchen with a warm bed and his favourite snacks, and with the benefit of him being a little older, he was being very grown-up!

The last layer was a stretchy protective material, which was essential to keep everything together and firmly in place. As I took it out of the package, I suddenly realized that it was exactly the same blue colour as the bulky bandage I'd removed from Ffion's leg when Pigley had met him at the practice on that noisy day.



With Pigley still relaxed, I wound the blue material round and round, extending it higher up Pigley's leg. It was neat and tidy and I was very pleased Pigley had stayed put for long enough to get the dressing on properly. It looked superb and would provide the important protection needed to allow the injury to heal.

"You'll have to keep it dry, if possible," I explained to Joyce as I admired my work. "If he's going outside in the wet or the mud, put a plastic bag over the bandage to protect it."

But Pigley's patience had finally run out. He leapt up with a shriek and skulked back under the table. The leg obviously felt funny with the new bandage, but the relief was clear, as I'd expected.

What wasn't expected was his reaction when Pigley noticed the bright blue colour! To him, it obviously meant that what had

happened to his friend Ffion was sure to happen to him. Next time, this vet would change his fat blue leg and swap it for a thin brown one! I tried to reassure him, but Pigley was already running out of the door.

I laughed. “Looks like he’s already made a speedy recovery!”

We walked out into the bright, cold day, pausing for a moment while Joyce dutifully wrapped a plastic bag around Pigley’s foot. Pigley grunted and then trotted happily around the farm, carrying on as if nothing had ever happened.

“Come on then, Em. Our work here is done.” Emmy barked eagerly. She was ready to get back to the practice and see what the rest of the day had in store, and so was I.

