



SPECKLED FRIENDS IN THE FARMYARD

With its distinctive plum pudding markings, traditional cottagers' pig the Oxford Sandy and Black is both delightful to behold and a contented, docile animal to keep, enjoying a resurgence in numbers due to dedicated breeders



AT WINDWHISTLE FARM on the Mendip Hills, the cool, late March breeze is living up to the name. Blackthorn hedges, dusted with white blossom, toss in the wind, and the birdsong comes in snatches.

In one field, a wooden shed provides a windbreak, and from the sheltered side comes the sound of snoring. Here, spread in the sun, lies a large pig; her legs outstretched. Her tan-coloured side, marked with random black splotches, rises and falls steadily, but her eyes remain tightly shut. Half a dozen small piglets, with the same brown and black patterning, rootle about nearby. Their pink ears bob as they nose through the grass or push deeper into a patch of crumbly earth, and there is a constant chatter of little squeaks and grunts.

This is an Oxford Sandy and Black sow and her litter, belonging to rare breed pig owner and breeder Susan Tanner. “The Sandy and Blacks are a very old breed,” she says. Written

mentions of these brown- and black-patterned pigs exist from the 18th century, but the breed is believed to be much older. “They were the traditional cottagers’ pigs from the Oxford area, hence their older name of Oxford Forest pig.”

Plum pudding

Oxfords also have the nickname of plum pudding pigs, based on their colour and spotted appearance. “The colour is from their hair, as they have pink skin underneath,” explains Susan. This hair is quite coarse on the adult pigs, reaching 2-3in (5-7.5cm) in length, but is much softer and shorter on piglets. The light-brown base colour varies from almost apricot to a reddish sandy-brown, while the randomly positioned dark markings are pure black. “These have to be splodges, not round spots,” she adds. The pigs also have ‘socks’ of white hair on their lower legs, a white tuft on the tip of the tail and, ideally, a narrow white

blaze down the centre of the face. The boars have two pairs of white, curving tusks on their upper and lower jaws. The tusks grow constantly, but only have nerves at the very base, so Susan removes them to prevent any injuries. “We cut them off with a cheese-wire, which doesn’t hurt them,” she explains.

On an adult Oxford, much of their long, gently dished face and snout is hidden by their large, hairy lop ears. “Their ears were one of the things I first loved about them,” recalls Susan. “They look so pretty, and they have a fringe of hair all around the edge.” Under the ears, their eyes are dark and of a similar size to those of a human, with curling lashes. “They have very expressive eyes,” adds Susan. “When they’re happy, their ear tips curl up, and I’m sure their eyes smile.”

A happy pig also has a tightly curled tail. “When they’re concentrating, their tails go straight and come down to their hocks; approximately half their height.” They are smaller in ➤



The coiled tail, with its tassel of fine, white hair, is set high on the pig’s rump.

Oxford Sandy and Black breeder Susan Tanner says the pigs are very food orientated. “We train them to follow a bucket when they’re being moved,” she explains.

“Dear pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling
Your ring?’ Said the Piggy, ‘I will”

Edward Lear, ‘The Owl and the Pussy-Cat’





“’Tis known he could speak Greek
As naturally as pigs squeak”

Samuel Butler, ‘Hudibras’

Although not the biggest of breeds, a sow still comes up to Susan’s waist.

“They reached a crisis point in the 1960s,” says Susan. “There were only approximately three farmers raising them commercially, and then one of those retired.”

The plight of the Oxford Sandy and Black, along with other traditional livestock breeds, provided the impetus for the founding of the Rare Breed Survival Trust (RBST) in 1973. However, the Oxfords were not initially recognised by the RBST as a breed for conservation efforts, for reasons which Susan says are not quite clear. “It seems there was a misunderstanding that these pigs could have been a cross-breed, which simply happened to look like the old Oxford breed.”

Determined to preserve their pigs, a small group of breeders founded the Oxford Sandy and Black Pig Society in 1985, and contacted all known keepers. Every possible Oxford pig was visited and inspected, and a breed standard, defining the distinctive traits, was drawn up. “Some of these seem arbitrary, such as their markings,” says Susan, “but other aspects are very practical, such as standing square on their toes or having a good ‘underline’ of well-spaced teats, so a full litter of piglets can be safely fed.” All pigs matching the breed standard were registered as pedigree Sandy and Blacks in the Herd Book, which is updated annually from the breed survey.

Thanks to these efforts, the Oxfords survived. “With all the pedigree records, the breed became officially recognised and supported by the British Pig Association in 2003,” explains Susan. In 2012, the society president, Rex Walters, carried out genetic research on the breed DNA. This showed the Oxfords were indeed a distinct breed and unrelated to other spotted pig breeds, such as the Gloucestershire Old Spot. Based on this, the RBST registered the Oxfords as a rare breed for conservation. “The pigs have come on since then. In 2004, there were only 162 pedigree sows and boars: by 2021, there were 558 sows and 142 boars. But across the UK, that’s still not very many.”

Susan herself became involved with Oxford Sandy and Blacks in 2009. “I used to be the event manager of the Bristol Balloon Fiesta. When I finished this in June 2009, I was interviewed live on regional television and was asked what I was going to do next. Quite out of the blue, I said: ‘I’m going to breed rare breed pigs.’” She initially planned to raise Gloucestershire Old Spot pigs, but a trip to a rare breed sale at Ross-on-Wye in Herefordshire changed this. “I saw the Oxford Sandy and Blacks and fell in love with them,” she says. “They are such a pretty colour and so inquisitive. They also have a longer, leaner shape, whereas Gloucesters are built like butterballs.”

Raising for meat

By the end of the autumn, Susan had acquired four Oxfords. “I got a nine-month-old sow, called Bella, and three eight-week old



Piglets under the gentle warmth of a heat lamp in a creep area, which provides the right temperature environment for them, as their mother rests nearby in the pen.

piglets: a gilt, or female, for breeding, and two of her brothers to raise for meat.” The first litter of piglets from Bella arrived in 2010. Susan’s Windwhistle pig herd, and her passion for Sandy and Blacks, has only grown since. “I now have 10 breeding sows and two boars, and usually a litter or two of piglets,” she says. Susan raises a few of the piglets for meat, which she sells in ‘meat boxes’ via her website, but most are sold to other pig keepers, either as breeding stock or weaners to be raised for meat.

Although it seems counter-intuitive to eat a rare breed, the ongoing demand for meat enables more pigs to be bred. “Not every piglet in a litter meets the breed standard, so selling most of them for meat means we can keep just the best ones to breed from,” explains Susan.

Sending home-raised pigs to the abattoir can be emotional. “I felt terrible about my first two,” she recalls, “but my husband

insisted that if I couldn’t eat my pigs, I couldn’t keep them. It’s about the mindset; knowing I gave them a good life, even if it was short. You need to care about the pigs; if you don’t, you shouldn’t be keeping them, but not get too attached. I call all my piglets ‘Little’: they don’t get named unless they become breeding stock. By the time they’re getting boisterous at six months old, I tend to look at them differently anyway.”

To help conserve the breed as a whole, Susan volunteers as the secretary for the breed society. “I send out the forms for the annual breed survey, maintain the members database, put buyers in touch with breeders and liaise with the British Pig Association, and so on.” She also handles the important task of recording new Oxford Sandy and Blacks. “When a litter of piglets are born, they’re ‘birth notified’ with the society: the number of piglets born to a particular sow and boar. Those kept for breeding are then ‘pedigree registered’ later on.”

Susan has also been the organiser for the pig section of the local agricultural show. “I have shown my pigs too, although my first-ever show was a bit of a fiasco,” she admits. “My sows totally ignored the judge and headed straight to the fence to be petted by the spectators.” This friendly and inquisitive nature is typical of Oxfords. “They love to be scratched, and they enjoy an apple. They tend to ignore our cattle, but the piglets love my Labrador, Teddy, and he loves them.” Oxfords are also quite vocal, with a vocabulary of grunts, huffs and dog-like barks.

All year round, the Oxfords live out on Susan’s fields, which are subdivided into 66ft by 66ft (20 x 20m) sections, with ➤

BREEDING

Pigs breed all year round, so Susan spaces the sows’ litters to provide piglets for sale throughout the year. The sows are first bred at 10 months old. “When a sow is on heat, the boars stand and bark loudly at her, so you can’t miss it,” she explains. Gestation is 115-120 days, and the sows come in from the fields to a purpose-built farrowing shed a few days beforehand. “This has CCTV, so we can keep an eye on them, and a ‘creep area’, with a heat lamp, behind a rail where the piglets can go to be warm, without any risk of their mother squashing them,” says Susan. A typical litter is six to 10 piglets, and can be up to 14. “The aim is to have all the piglets the same size. At birth, they weigh less than a bag of sugar, but when they’re weaned seven to eight weeks later, they weigh 25kg. By the time the weaners go to the abattoir at eight months old, they weigh 110kg.”

At three weeks, sow and litter move out to the field. Susan inspects the piglets for potential breeding stock at the same time. “Sometimes, a perfect piglet catches my eye right away, but mostly they’re too small at birth. I look at their shape, their underline, and if they have the right markings. Then I check them again at weaning. Usually, it’s about one per litter which I’ll keep.”



electric fencing. Each area has a small wooden shed or sloping-sided wooden pig 'ark', bedded out with straw. These are big enough to fit either a sow and litter or two adult sows. "The first thing they do on moving into a new area is inspect the house," explains Susan. "Then they start to dig."

This love of digging is a trait which marks Oxfords as a 'woodland' breed, rather than 'orchard' pig breeds, such as the Kunekune, which tend to graze. "They're moved to a fresh patch once it's all churned up," says Susan. "I've had people ask: 'Have you been ploughing that field?', but no, it's just the pigs."

In winter, Susan puts extra straw into the arks to keep the pigs warm, and fits flexible plastic flaps over the doorways to prevent draughts. In summer, pigs have the opposite problem of keeping cool. "They make mud wallows to lie in, and stay in the shade from the hedges," she explains. Susan also puts up canvas sheets on frames for extra shade. Young piglets can burn their ears, which do not yet have a thick layer of hair, so she applies sun cream in very hot weather. "They seem to enjoy it," she says.

As well as digging up their grass, the Oxfords are fed on a twice-daily ration of commercial 'pig nuts' in open troughs. Their free-range lifestyle means the pigs stay healthy and lean. "They don't reach slaughter weight quite as fast as housed pigs, but because they're walking about, it's all muscle, with only a little fat 'marbled' through the meat. This gives it a fantastic flavour," says Susan.

However, it is plain that her delight is in the pigs, not the pork chops. "I just think they are the most beautiful pig you can have," she says happily. "And if you are going to look at an animal and feed it twice a day, you might as well have one that's a joy to behold." ■

A COTTAGE TRADITION

As cottagers' pigs, the meat from Oxford Sandy and Blacks would have been preserved for the winter as dry cured bacon. It is still popular for home bacon making today. "I sell quite a lot of side cuts to people curing their own bacon," says Oxford Sandy and Black breeder Susan Tanner. Unlike mass-produced bacon, made with brine, traditional bacon curing uses dry salt to extract water from the meat, inhibiting bacterial decay and imparting the classic bacon flavour. Cured bacon can last for six months or more.

The meat is cured as 1-2kg sections, which are then sliced for use. Pork back makes back or English bacon, while pork belly makes streaky bacon. Each section is rubbed with salt, mixed with sugar, pepper and some other spices, such as crushed juniper berries, depending on the desired flavour. When the meat is completely coated with the salt cure mix, it is put in the refrigerator for 24 hours, during which time a thick brine drains out of it. This process is repeated daily for five to seven days until the meat surface is firm and hard. The remaining salt is then rinsed off. At this point, the bacon can be used or dried in a cool oven for a longer shelf life.

"The flavour is absolutely phenomenal," says Susan. "There's no water, as in shop-bought bacon. It's just tender meat and dry, golden fat that melts in the mouth. It's exquisite."

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www.oxfordsandypigs.co.uk

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Outside the sheds, an Oxford Sandy and Black revels in its muddy enclosure.