



Sharing a common life of prayer, hospitality and work

Summer Newsletter

August 2024

Hello friends,

Warm greetings from Pilsdon where we are currently gathering apples, beans, tomatoes, and much more besides...

We continue to trust in the abundance that comes from living in community here, in spite of our smaller number and reduced capacity over these past eight months. I was trying to describe to someone here the Gospel story of the feeding of the five thousand, where Jesus blesses the five loaves and two fish that are brought as an offering, and somehow with the little that is available there becomes more than enough to nourish the crowds.

We offer what we have here, and it is blessed, and it has fed and nourished those who have come to visit and stay with us over this time.

The fact that the Community *feels* good to those who visit us is a real encouragement. Over the summer we have had many people dropping by for a cup of tea or to stay for a day or two; all of them continue to appreciate the peaceful nature of this place and it's warm welcome. We can sometimes take for granted the small ways in which we care for each other here, but when others come we see how these ways contribute to the gentle and nurturing atmosphere. Last week my friend's children who were visiting commented after chatting with some of the guests after lunch: "everyone is so kind". We are glad that this is what people encounter when they spend time with us here.

Lynn and Chris who have been servicing our fire-extinguishers for decades came a couple of weeks ago, their last visit to us before they retire. As they went about their rounds, checking this and that, I could hear them getting distracted, commenting on the beautiful fruit in the orchard, the gentleness of the cows, and the peaceful feeling of the place. Their sense of wonder about the community was delightful, and it re-enchanted me too. We are grateful to them for the service they have given to Pilsdon over the years, their good humour, and the wonderful personality that they bring to what they do.



Meadow watching over her twin calves Samson and Delilah



A view of our yard and the Pen from the Manor



L-R: Mary, Lynn, Chris and Eddie

Whenever we speak about Pilsdon with others it reminds us of the treasure that it is. James and I were invited to give a talk about the community at the UK Communities Conference in Oxfordshire in July. As we thought about how to describe Pilsdon we decided to recreate the Common Room, and recount some of the conversations that we've had with people in there over the years. Jonathan Herbert was there with us, and we traded stories and memories about the radical hospitality of this community. In and amongst the different intentional communities we encountered at the conference we could recognize that Pilsdon continues to offer something quite unique. We had many chats with people intrigued by this way of life and we've already had a couple of requests to come and stay and experience Pilsdon for themselves.

We have had some challenges over the last few months with fewer boots on the ground. As the only Members, James and I have been stretched quite thin, and life has sometimes been demanding. However, we have been supported by a fantastic group of volunteers, who have come with such generosity over this time; bringing energy, enthusiasm and good humour. This has included wonderful Hannah who came from the Bruderhof in May for four months. We have also been blessed with such extraordinary guests, each contributing what they can to keep Pilsdon in good heart.



Bob the Builder...sorry, Painter



Whilst we have not been able to take on any new Guests, we continue to welcome Wayfarers and retreat visitors. We have also managed to get quite a lot of maintenance and repair work done. Jane has been coordinating the work of replacing window frames in the main house, rooms have been decorated, and the annex painted. As you will read later in the newsletter, the front garden wall, which has been crumbling for a while has finally been rebuilt. It's wonderful that Pilsdon offers purpose for people, however short a time they might come and stay for.



We do look forward to a new season ahead, despite not knowing exactly what that will hold. The Trustees are continuing to search for a new Warden, we have several membership discernments, and some people interested in longer term volunteering. It feels like a good moment, before the autumn and the Anniversary, for James and I to take a slightly longer break. With much support from the Trustees, we are going to take a short sabbatical from the beginning of September returning just before the Anniversary celebrations. The community will be held safely by Bob Edwards, Sue Langdon, Jane Kilty and various volunteers over this time. We are grateful for this opportunity to be refreshed and recharged.



We know that Pilsdon is very dear to so many of you, and we are grateful for all the ways you hold this community in your hearts and support us with your prayers.

With love,
Mary and James



James and Shep the shepherd

J: Let me start by asking what shepherding skills you brought with you to Pilsdon?

S: When I came to Pilsdon I had zero shepherding skills. The person who looked after the sheep before me left in January and there was a void. Someone was needed to look after them and work alongside you and I jumped at the chance to have the opportunity to get some shepherding skills.

J: What's it like looking after the sheep here at Pilsdon despite being out in the rain, like today, getting soggy and covered in mud and sheep poo?

S: Well right from the beginning I knew it was going to be a heavy involvement with the upbringing of the new lambs. Come March it was all systems go but it was just magic seeing them popping out night after night! From that we had 12 very healthy, awesome lambs and so the skills that you taught me right from the start came in handy and I had to learn very quickly on the job. I found that with my love for animals it came quite natural and instantly I was enjoying the situation knowing that there was going to be so much more still to learn.

J: I still remember when we sat out for so long on a bale of straw watching the ewes because we were so sure they were going to give birth at any moment. But we waited and waited drinking tea into the early hours of the morning and.... nothing! You were great company though and the time flew by.

J: So you're now feeding the sheep all week now. What would you say is your favourite part of that experience?

S: I particularly enjoy when I approach the field and they hear my voice and they come running. And what it shows to me is that I've gained their trust and I feel like I've got an individual relationship with all 19 of them. Each one brings their own little character which is just a complete joy to watch. It used to be really difficult to catch the lambs but now I can just go into the field, sit down on my butt and they come running over to me.

Doing the shepherding is a position that I've just totally relished. And I've proved to myself and others that I can take on the responsibility. It's a real honour to be given the trust and I'm really glad to be able to give back by being dedicated and making sure things are running smoothly.

J: The lambs are so friendly and that's all credit to you Shep as you've spent hours and hours with them building that trust you mentioned. Some of them were so scared initially are now so comfortable around you that they seem more like fluffy dogs than sheep.

I just wanted to use this opportunity to thank you for all you've done. There's so much to juggle at Pilsdon, especially at the moment, and it's fantastic to have someone so reliable and dedicated to care for the sheep who really loves what they do. It's great seeing you in the field being surrounded by a hungry flock at feeding times. It's like a rugby scrum with you trapped in the middle with a bucket rather than a ball. I'm so glad you're getting so much back from all the work you put in by faithfully checking on them each day. I couldn't have got done what needs to get done without you so thanks for everything.

The Whitchurch Flower and Dog Show 2024

Once again The Pilsdon Community raised the bar at the Whitchurch Canonicorum Village Fete, winning many trophies including, the tallest stinging nettle... (Pilsdon has such fertile soil..!)

In the days leading up to this auspicious occasion there had been lots of excitement in the AGA room and detailed preparation such as the 'oiling and polishing' of some fine specimens of pepper and the tying up of giant handsome leeks, to mention but a few!

The Show turned out to be a delightful and very well attended event on Bank Holiday Monday, bathed in hazy sunshine and serenaded to the sound of the Morris Men dancing their jigs, happy children playing games including splat the rat (could be a useful one for Pilsdon!) and stalls of produce...

The marquee was packed with produce, flower arrangements, bread and cakes, with frequent prize winning appearances from the Pilsdon gardeners...

Salena's beautifully crocheted entry won the praises of everyone but the judges, who only gave it third place... As I said to Ian, an event like this could only happen in rural England! *Els and Ian Jolly*



Shep and his prize winning leeks



Salena's stunning wreath



Morgan and his winning peppers



Simon's nettle!

How long does it take to build a wall?

James had sent me an email, asking if I could re-build an old wall that had fallen down. It was a great piece of good fortune, I really do enjoy building work. I was in the diary to spend seven days at Pilsdon as a volunteer. I arrived on Sunday, and it poured with rain on Monday. But then the sunshine came out, the Wisteria was fragrant at tea break, Pilsdon was at its most beautiful, and I really wanted to take my time. In the end the work took over ten days, but nobody minded, and I was very well fed.

I'm a retired Social Worker, my working life was full of care plans, reviews, case conferences, etc. After the 2009 banking collapse, our caseloads became huge because staff vacancies could not be filled. There was an immense time pressure to help people in the highest risk. Which is difficult, because sometimes, simply to survive the day and to get a bit of protection from deep hurt, people need to build up a wall, just to keep the crazy world at a safe distance. It can take a long time to let it down, bit by bit. As James said in one of his lovely mid-day prayers, it takes time to build up trust, to take the risk to trust again. I might even, once, have put trust into a client's care plan, to be achieved, quickly, in time for the next review, in six months' time.



During the week, we had a visitor who expressed an earnest need to "help poor people". Do the Pilsdon staff members help people? I remember one long standing member, some years ago, who was adamant that they certainly did not.

Pilsdon, thankfully, does not do care plans and case conferences. And yet, as an ex-guest told me, on the Sunday I arrived, while he was just popping in for the day, living at Pilsdon had "saved my life". He finds Pilsdon "peaceful".

People who know Pilsdon often say that they don't really know what Pilsdon does. After all the gardening, milking and dishes are done, and the talking has been said for the day, there is still something around that helps, but it's hard to define what it is.

So what is Pilsdon? I'm sure there's somewhere in the Bible that explains how the spirit of peace and love takes its own time to emerge in each of us. Mary would talk, at prayers, about how we slowly, slowly become who we need to be. Do staff members help? Of course they do. It's wonderful to watch their care and attention as they get alongside people who are trying to work it all out. And there is an immense amount of kindness where guests help one another.

Maybe Pilsdon works, (and it has done, over time, for more than 60 years), because it's more than the people in its community. There is certainly a pervasive spirit, or atmosphere around the place that's hard to resist. Lots of people turn up just to feel the peace of the house and grounds. To feel the warmth of welcome, the easy acceptance, the gentle boundaries and rhythms, and also to somehow feel in themselves, (whether they attend Church or not), the very personal prayers that are softly spoken every day. Prayers that four times a day, month after month, year after year, talk about hope for the future, how we can learn to care for ourselves, and others, how we can trust and receive the love that is there for us all.

How can you nail down a spirit? It seems that we don't need to. Better to just sit, in the time on offer, and let it unfold in each of us. Sometimes the wall is too big to take down in six months.

So how long does it take to fix a wall? Well, longer than I thought. But that's one of the beauties of Pilsdon itself, it gives us the time, simply lots of warm time, to re-build. **Martin Biggin**



James presenting Bob with his trophies



Hannah cooking up a storm

From the Trustees

The Pilsdon Community, as we all know, is one of those special places. As Trustees, we all feel the privilege of being part of the history, but also the future, of a place that has been a refuge and a restorer to so many people over the years. We depend on those who give a period of their lives to live and work ‘in community’, whether it be as a Volunteer, Member or Warden. And it takes very special people to fill those roles.

Over the last few months, we have relied even more on the Members to lead the Community, and it seems fitting, as we wait for a new Warden to come to Pilsdon, that we give James and Mary a chance to breathe a little more freely for a few weeks, and to re-centre themselves. So it is that they will be taking a break, returning before the Anniversary, and we wish them well as they have a chance to travel and re-energise themselves in different ways.

Bob Edwards will be the ‘Responsible Person’, having supported James and Mary as dedicated residential volunteer for the past 5 months; he has so much experience from his time as warden at Brook House, our former follow on community house in Dorchester. Sue Langdon will be returning for a few days each week as Residential Chaplain, and Jane Kilty, as Operations Manager, will act as the lynch pin that hold it all together. As in the past months, we are supported by so many volunteers who have come for a few days, weeks and even months, and they are always so welcome. Our guests have taken on added responsibilities to ensure Pilsdon runs as Pilsdon does, and I, as Chair of Trustees, am grateful to have the support of my three fellow trustees – Chris Stoot, Els Jolly and Tim Lockett.

Amanda Streatfeild, Chair of Trustees

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Pilsdon’s 66th Anniversary— Sunday 13th October (arrivals for coffee at 11am)

Do let us know if you would like to come by ringing or emailing the office

Carol Service—Sunday 15th December, 6.30pm

Barn Service at 11am Christmas Day—followed by mince pies

After years of struggling and self-defeat you have now chosen to make the heroes journey
One thing to remember and not forget the hero is not made in those proud hours after victory

But in those long desperate and hellish hours of darkness,

While moving through the darkness and into the light and not giving up

Poem adapted by Carol



Odds and Ends, Nooks and Crannies

Entering Pilsdon from the south side of the house by the main hall, one would encounter a large religious painting by the hand of Jan Van Eyck, called the father of oil painting. This picture is an example of photo litho. Until after the second world war for such work, each colour was selected by eye, work in which the Swiss excelled.

On the left-hand side of the now dining room are several features of interest. The large side board is heavily weighted towards the base and may have come from a ship's furnishings. It would date from the turn of the nineteenth century. Running the length of the room are two large dining tables, seating twelve persons. These once graced Brook House for a time, which was the move on house for Pilsdon. The dining room once served as the kitchen and as the centre of the house would have continued as such until the 19th century.

The room is lit by four large windows that have examples of stained glass. These being of liquid colour rather than fixed glass. Above the door and on lintels in the adjacent passage-way are further examples of crude carving of witch marks to ward off evil spirits, there is a national data base of such carvings.

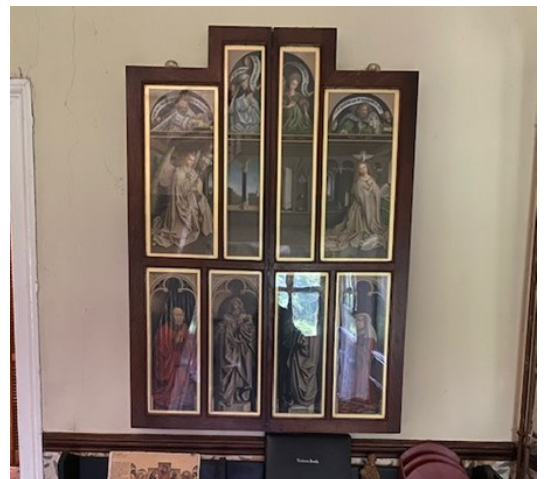
Trevor



Dining room



Stained glass window



Clockwise from above: sideboard, Van Eyck painting, witchmarks

Meadow

It's a real privilege to be able to continue the ancient practice of hand milking on a daily basis, when the opportunity is so rare for most people these days. And if you're wondering what the perfect milking cow would be for a place like Pilsdon, it can easily be summed up by one name 'Meadow'

Her milking career began on 26th April 2022, 3 days after delivering her first calf Lily. We wondered how easy it would be to get her into the parlour and be willing to stand still. The farm notes say 'she didn't mind being milked although she did keep moving and testing the restraining chain.'

We persevered and quickly found her to be the ideal milking cow for our needs, super placid in nature, very bright, a delight to milk by hand, very easy to bribe with feed and great at producing lots of delicious creamy milk. She went on to have her second calf this year and to our surprise delivered twins, named Samson and Delilah (the freemartin) – both doing very well and growing fast.

At the start of any milking session there is always a slight pause as those timetabled to carry out the task prepare to negotiate which cow they'd prefer to milk. There are rumors that on occasions where agreements were difficult to reach, the use of the game 'paper, rock' scissors' was employed in order for the champion to benefit from an easy milking session with Meadow.

A beautiful drawing of Meadow by Hannah



What once was a task that produced some trepidation and required a fair amount of perseverance, suddenly became a joy. Anyone new who'd never milked before, and was slightly nervous, was often much relieved and filled with confidence after having the chance to milk Meadow. Once they'd finished they would beam with pride as they were already anticipating anybody looking on to shout 'Wow! You're a natural.'

It's easy to fall in love with a cow, especially one you spend so much time with who excitedly runs up to the fence to greet you, enjoys an affectionate scratch on the neck and is happy to be friends with anyone who wants to feed her nuts. We had assumed that we would be able to keep her on the farm for many years to come and that she would be something consistent to many people who return to Pilsdon and wonder what's changed, just like previous milking cows have been. But unfortunately, Meadow tested positive for TB this summer and so had to be removed from the farm. It's really sad to have had to say goodbye to such an adorable animal that we've grown so fond of. She was with us for 5 years, our best milking cow and will be greatly missed.

Meadow getting to the feed pellets first as usual

James

It's the little things.....



I just thought I would share a few things from the Pilsdon garden which have gladdened my heart and caused me to wonder at nature and what we find in our vegetable garden.

In the middle of the “leek field” – a legion of six hundred such plants all in serried rows – I noticed a seedling whilst hoeing. Small, but growing rapidly and outstripping all competitors, I decided to hoe round it and give it a chance – whatever it might turn out to be. At one stage it was thought to be, possibly, an aubergine because of the shape and colour of the foliage, but as the days and weeks passed, it became apparent that we had a huge sunflower plant. A rogue, but a beautiful rogue nonetheless. Now fully grown, with multiple flower heads – one of which was a prizewinner at Whitchurch show – it provides a wonderful centerpiece and I can't help but wonder at it and it's unintentional presence here whenever I pass it by.

Our bean structure – built by James for runner and climbing beans which have been planted and tended by Henry - is a marvelous thing in its own right. Unlike anything you might find in a National Trust or RHS garden, the poles for the beans are irregular in length. Once the beans had become established and started to climb – rather late on this year due to the season – one bean plant in particular had overtaken all others and was racing ahead! It happened to be going up the longest bean pole, standing a good foot and a half taller than the others! Was this coincidence? Or something else, perhaps the bean had realized it had the furthest to go - perhaps there was something going on between pole and seed – I wonder.

To control our rat population, we have had to resort to using humane traps to catch the rodents. The use of such traps is to prevent accidentally killing other wildlife by snap-traps or poison. The justification for this was the capture of a hedgehog – a healthy mature specimen who was discovered one morning apparently unconcerned by its' captivity. When we tried to remove it from the trap it would just curl up into a ball making removal impossible, it was a case of just opening the trap entrance and leaving it to go out in its' own sweet time. It was always hoped that hedgehogs might live hereabouts for the benefit of the garden by keeping slugs under control but I don't think anyone had ever seen one. “Trap-Happy” - as it became known - was either not very intelligent or very hungry, or possibly both, it has become a regular visitor even going from one trap to another in the same visit. We know it's the same one by the small, but very fetching dob of nail varnish between its' shoulder blades – the nail varnish is coral pink bytheway..... **Bob**

