

Harry Houdini,

By Harry McKerchar.

Back in the day, the town of Falashiels had its own abattoir which had a massive throughput of cattle, sheep, and occasional pigs. The abattoir was beginning to get rundown, and eventually it closed due to increasingly tight regulations relating to Health and Safety and the removal of its licence to export carcasses to the EU. It had become prohibitive to run the abattoir as an ongoing business and, today, the nearest abattoirs are over 50 miles away, so livestock have to be trucked long distances to be processed, with some travelling as far as the south of England or even sent abroad in the live transporters. In my opinion, this is unacceptable. More local, small, efficient abattoirs should be available and would benefit livestock farmers, animal health and welfare.

A number of years ago, when the abattoir was still very active, a local farmer who'd diversified part of his farming enterprise into breeding wild boar sent several finished animals to the abattoir to be processed for organic wild boar meat. One of the larger pigs managed to escape from the holding pens and the area called the lairage, and disappeared. Local radio and television broadcasts appealed for help to find the escapee, and after a few days a couple of national newspapers also got hold of the story. One of the journalists christened the escaped wild boar Harry Houdini, recalling the escape artist and showman of Victorian times, and from then on the boar was called "Harry Houdini escapologist Wild Boar." He was nowhere to be seen, and the locals hoped and wished he'd returned to his natural habitat, roaming free in the Border Woodlands. Anecdotal evidence spread that he was hiding in the vast wooded area along the banks of the river Tweed, which stretched for miles in the Lee of the Eildon hills. Professional marksman and gamekeepers were employed to find and kill such a dangerous wild animal, still at large, as he became a concern for public safety. But as the weeks passed, interest in the Boar waned and other news items made headlines. The local public were more interested in parking restrictions, and local rugby and football results.

On a Friday night, in pitch black November, as a country vet I was out on a late-night emergency call, driving my way home from the clinic after attending to an injured dog. My journey home involved a dark drive passing through a wooded valley. On either side, trees still hung onto some golden leaves and, being a deciduous wood with large numbers of rowan, beech, sycamore and oak, there were lots of acorns scattered over the road. Coming out of town, the road turns sharp left into the valley and then dips around a blind spot. About ten metres in front of me, just below the summit of the quiet B road, stood the acorn-grazing wild boar. Chomping, unaware of his pending peril, he stood directly in my path, right in the centre of the tarmac. He looked up, startled in my headlights, too late to move and I too late to swerve out of his path... Thump! A sickening thump. Bang!

I'd hit the boar head-on with my four-by-four work truck. With high ground clearance and large tyres, there was no damage to my vehicle, but the poor animal lay severely injured; on his side, legs and tail twitching, blood streaming. He was already 95% dead, and very soon to die, thrashing his last, so I quickly jumped out of the truck, myself in shock, and humanely dispatched the dying animal.

I then used my mobile phone to contact the local police station to ask for assistance. I explained roughly what had happened, and they said that an officer would be out to help me as soon as possible. Within five minutes, Shuggie Richards, one of our local police constables, arrived. I knew Shuggie very well; a strapping, six foot four tall, and a well-seasoned police constable. He was a stalwart of the local rugby club, who lived in the same village as me and his children attended the same school as my kids. He more or less fell out of his panda car, which he seemed to be tightly squeezed into, and put his checked policeman's helmet on straight. It was such a relief to see Shuggie; "a weel kent face" had come out to help me. He's been involved in many professional cases with me over the years, including dangerous dogs, cruelty cases and other animals escaping from fields. I think he was glad to see me too.

Shuggie was quite taken aback at the sight of this large, beautiful animal lying dead in the middle of the road, having evaded capture for weeks then inadvertently been knocked down by his friend, the local vet, also called Harry! Shuggie linked up to the local police station to say that indeed, Harry Houdini, the boar who'd escaped from the abattoir a few weeks prior, had been "found dead in the middle of the road by Harry the vet on his way home from a call out." As he was saying that he winked at me. He'd left out that the boar, in fact, had been run over and killed by the same! I couldn't hear the conversation coming from the police station, only the sound of laughter. The police, thankfully, kept secret the real events but, even now to this day, some of the older police officers, who were young PCs on duty that day, tease me and call me "Harry the boar killer" when out of hearing distance from others.

Shuggie and I, with some difficulty, dragged the carcass to a nearby layby, thus removing the danger from any other passing vehicles. I called in Pussy Ball, the local dead stock remover, an old-fashioned knacker who'd himself once worked at the local abattoir. Pussy was a huge, red-haired and bearded local legend, standing six feet tall in his hobbled old-fashioned toe-turned-up boots. He weighed over 20 stone, plus the rest, with cheery round-faced features exhibiting a grin like a Cheshire Cat. "You both seem to be in a hurry to get things done," he said, but the chat and the craic got lost in Pussy's own stories.

Pussy had always been a great help to all the local vets over the years, removing dead stock from farms and stables. Some cases, those undiagnosed before death, ended up in his yard but he always waited and was willing to delay rendering these carcasses until the vets arrived to have a look and do a post-mortem. He would have his own opinions on the

pathology involved, in what was going on before the death of these animals, and he always stated the animal had “Pneumonia or Wanderers or Blackleg”, which was the full range of his diagnostic acumen. His knowledge base may have been limited, but he was always good fun and full of banter. Pussy was, and still is, a great help to me. In the pandemic of Foot and Mouth disease in the year 2000, he and myself were employed as foot soldiers by the Department of Agriculture in the cleaning up and diagnostic processes involved to curtail the spread of the disease. Draconian methods were used to control that outbreak, and Pussy was always there with this never-ending sense of humour, often in humourless situations, and was efficient with the donkey work of livestock culling, destruction of affected and contact animals, and with the funeral pyres burning carcasses afterwards.

But back to the night of the boar. Pussy quickly looked at the carcass and realised the boar had been badly mangled and bruised in a traffic accident, not humanely slaughtered and prepared properly by bleeding out. (Bleeding out allows the meat to set properly and be approved, inspected and certified for human consumption and butchering.). Sadly, this boar was only fit for non-human consumption and would end up in the rendering plant and fallen-stock yard, probably cooked for animal feed or dog food. At my request, the carcass was taken away and Pussy agreed to secrecy. Shuggie and he loaded it into the back of his fallen-stock van, and I could see tears of laughter developing in his eyes, and that huge grin, when the reality came to him that this was the boar that had filled newspaper and local television headlines for weeks. Everyone had been talking about it and now he was involved with the removal of the carcass, away to be disposed of by himself after all the fuss!

Reports in the next week's newspapers stated that: “the wild boar had been found dead on the roadside near the exit of the abattoir that he'd escaped from,” and that “a local vet had been called in to identify the animal and to certify death, presumed as a result of a road traffic accident”. Until now I've held my secret close, but today is the day to state the truth; the story finally disclosed. My thanks go to Shuggie, Pussy and all the police staff for keeping my secret for all these years. And, of course, I give honour to the star, Harry Houdini, the main character of this story, whose tale has now been told.

Harry McKerchar Nov .2021.