

Donkey magic!

Francesca Watson

*investigates the beginning
of a beautiful friendship*



Firm friends –
Amanda and Twinkle

If ever there were a fitting place for a donkey... or three... then surely it would be in the heart of the forest famous for being the home of Pooh, Piglet and, of course, Eeyore. Well, the National Cat Centre in Sussex's Ashdown Forest has proudly become a Donkey Guardian due to an exciting new partnership with The Donkey Sanctuary which will see our two charities promote each other's rehoming schemes.

In late June a big truck rolled up and three beautiful donkeys called Holly, Star and Twinkle trotted out and into their new home. The trio have been in the care of The Donkey Sanctuary since 2012. Star and Twinkle are a 'bonded' pair, which means they cannot be separated from each other. Holly has no bonded partner but had become such good friends with Star and Twinkle that it was deemed that they should be rehomed together. Thankfully there was more than enough space for all three at the National Cat Centre!

A new beginning

These surprising new additions to the National Cat Centre are just the start of Cats Protection's new partnership with The Donkey Sanctuary. Head of Operations Tanya Vigus has been a key player in securing the new collaboration.

Tanya explains how she came up with the initial idea. "I don't live far from The Donkey Sanctuary's main site in Devon and I had regularly attended their open days and events for several years. I read

some literature about how they were hoping to increase the profile of their fostering scheme. This allows people to foster donkeys at their own homes although the donkeys always remain under the ownership of The Donkey Sanctuary. The scheme finds loving homes for donkeys in care who would benefit from the kind of one-to-one attention private residences can provide. Donkeys are carefully matched with prospective homes to ensure a happy future for both donkeys and foster owners. It helps The Donkey Sanctuary both financially and in terms of freeing up their staff to provide more specialist care to the donkeys that need it most.

"It occurred to me that their fostering scheme paralleled our own rehoming objectives. Working alongside other animal charities is extremely important to Cats Protection and The Donkey Sanctuary has many similarities to our charity. We are both like-minded, single-species charities and experts at what we do yet we can still learn so much from each other.

"So I took the idea of a possible partnership to Cats Protection's Chief Executive, Peter Hepburn and he was intrigued by the idea, telling me to explore it further. With Peter's help it was subsequently pitched to the then-Chief Executive of The Donkey Sanctuary, David Cook, who also loved the idea.

"This collaboration allows both charities to increase the profile of their rehoming schemes and connects us with fresh audiences both at a local and a national level, without being in competition with each other."

Tanya goes on: "The first step was to become Donkey Guardians and we were so excited when Holly, Twinkle and Star arrived at the National Cat Centre in June. The National Cat Centre was an ideal location for the pilot scheme as we had the infrastructure to accommodate their needs. We had the space for their stables and paddock, but also a ready-made pool of donkey care volunteers in the shape of our very excited Cats Protection staff!

"Next is to have a Cats Protection presence at The Donkey Sanctuary which will initially be a virtual rehoming centre at their headquarters in Sidmouth, Devon. There will be an interactive TV screen showing visitors



Photos: CP Library

the cats that the local area branches and centres have ready for adoption. The Sidmouth headquarters is currently undergoing a major refurbishment but once this is done we plan to have a three-pen Homing & Information Centre there which will house actual cats."

The Donkey Sanctuary also has seven farms across the UK (some of which have already rehomed some of our cats!) where there is the potential to have more virtual or actual Cats Protection rehoming centres. And Tanya is already looking at Cats Protection's adoption centres around the UK, earmarking those that have the potential to house donkeys!

This collaboration has been agreed as a quid pro quo venture with The Donkey Sanctuary paying all the major costs associated with the National Cat Centre becoming Donkey Guardians. In return Cats Protection will be paying the costs for our presence at any of The Donkey Sanctuary farms.

"This is very much a break-even partnership," Tanya continues. "Just as The Donkey Sanctuary had a presence at our recent open day, raising money with a collection, we too will have a presence at their headquarters in Sidmouth. "With a footfall of eight

to ten thousand people at just one of their open days we can ensure that Cats Protection's messages are being spread even further and to new audiences. The donkeys' presence at the National Cat Centre is already proving popular with the public and with luck we will see more of our cats from the site being adopted."

Tanya is thrilled at seeing her initial idea becoming a reality. "A huge amount of work from both sides has gone into making this partnership work," she says, "and it's wonderful to see it going so well and the two charities working in harmony together."

Andy Foxcroft, Head of International Welfare for The Donkey Sanctuary, is equally enthusiastic:

"We're delighted to be working alongside Cats Protection with the aim of rehoming more donkeys and cats. There is great potential with this creative new venture; to learn from each other and reflect our shared interests while promoting our mutual passion for animal welfare."

There can be no doubt that with the arrival of Holly, Star and Twinkle, Cats Protection is embarking on a new and exciting journey. ▶



Settling in

Reporting for duty!

Thoroughly excited by the thought of having donkeys, a number of staff volunteered to be their carers giving up their spare time to care for them.

Amanda McNally, Volunteer Donkey Co-ordinator explains: "The volunteers have been doing a fantastic job, fitting their time around work, in rain and shine – without them we would not have been able to become Donkey Guardians. They are very dedicated and all of them have undertaken the required training.

"The Donkey Sanctuary runs a one-day course where our volunteers learn how to do daily tasks and importantly why they are vital in maintaining good husbandry practices. This includes mucking out (poo picking!) putting on head collars, hoof picking, grooming and learning about the correct tools to use. The training has not only shown the volunteers how to do these daily tasks but also shown them how to do them safely, ensuring the welfare of the volunteers, as well as that of the donkeys."

It's only been a few weeks but the donkeys are settling in well. They all have different personalities and interestingly, much like the cats that we rehome, their personalities have changed and developed since settling in their new home.

Amanda explains: "Holly is the most independent. At times she will come away from the other two and seems to like her own space. She is very kind and gentle and so affectionate, she's

as soft as anything! As soon as you put the bridle on her she seems to know that she's going to be groomed, have her hooves cleaned and stays still for you. She's our go-to donkey for the more nervous volunteer, she really loves human company. Whatever you give to Holly she gives back.

"Star was quite relaxed when she first arrived, affectionate and cuddly with Twinkle being the more nervous of the two. But now Twinkle is more gently laid back and Star is getting teenage naughty. One moment she's calm and lovely but then she tries to wind one of the others up! They are fascinating and I love seeing them develop."

According to The Donkey Sanctuary the National Cat Centre is an A star home. There are two large stables, an equipment store and a large paddock curving around the building. The pasture is full of very rich, sugary grass which means the amount of grass donkeys have access to is controlled by strip grazing using electric fencing to prevent them from becoming

overweight. The Donkey Sanctuary's Welfare Adviser for Sussex, Mark Kerr says: "At the moment the donkeys are at an ideal weight with perfect waist measurements, although being a gentleman I won't publicise them! They're currently nibbling on shortened grass, which means that they will also eat their barley straw which is great at giving them fibre and meeting their nutritional needs. I am delighted to see them settling in to their new home. They're such friendly, inquisitive donkeys that I know they will adore the attention from all the animal-loving visitors at Cats Protection."

Amanda adds: "As the grass is already so rich we would ask that 'treats' such as apples, carrots and sugar-free mints not be given to the girls. We also don't want the donkeys to associate proffered hands with treats. Hands are for petting and stroking and we want lots of that! The donkeys love back scratches, noses stroked and ears and chins tickled; they just love people and attention! Mark says that he's often contacted by the public to find out where they can visit donkeys and now he can tell them about the National Cat Centre. So many people love donkeys and these donkeys have a lot of love to give back!" ●

If you're in Sussex then why not pop in to the National Cat Centre where you can see some of our fantastic cats, our three lovely donkeys as well as embark upon our Nature Trail and enjoy coffee and cake in our Visitor Centre? We are open seven days a week (except Christmas and New Year's Day) 10am-4pm. www.cats.org.uk/find-us/the-national-cat-centre

The Donkey Sanctuary supports projects to alleviate the suffering of donkeys in 35 countries worldwide, including Sanctuaries across Europe, where more than 18,800 donkeys and mules have been cared for, and major projects in Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Kenya and Mexico, where donkey welfare is improved through community education and veterinary work. The charity also provides assisted therapy for children and adults with additional needs and visits to care homes in the local community from its centres in Belfast, Birmingham, Ivybridge, Leeds, Manchester and Sidmouth. www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk