

# Shetland Project

## REPORT



## Mane Chance Sanctuary

Mane Chance Sanctuary is a horse sanctuary situated just outside Guildford in Surrey. But we are a horse sanctuary with a difference.

We rescue and rehabilitate old, abused and abandoned horses and ponies after which we work tirelessly to regain their health and trust; two things often destroyed as a result of their previous suffering. The health and wellbeing of our animals is paramount to us and we strive to be thought-leaders whenever possible. At Mane Chance we offer our horses a home for life and we often take in some of the more complex behavioural cases as we give whatever time is needed to bring the horses not only back to physical health, but also to emotional health. Many of our horses come with deep trauma and mistrust of the human form; but our method of horse-care gradually rebuilds the horse-human relationship and then the

trust follows. Sometimes it takes just weeks to reach that point but for some horses it takes years. At Mane Chance we have all the patience in the world!

It's what we then do that makes us a little different from most. We don't ride our horses at Mane Chance or rehome them in numbers; instead we work with them in welcoming to the site less privileged adults and children, those with additional needs, terminal illness or simply those who would benefit from quiet time spent just in the presence of our horses. Horses have an incredible emotional capacity to interact calmly with compassion and kindness - a few minutes spent with our herd gives so much pleasure and also vital moments of respite to those who have challenges to face in their everyday lives. Horses are non-judgmental and they are amazingly intuitive animals. Our interactions are powerful – after a few minutes of being together, very poorly or vulnerable visitors are able to feel a connection with our horses, often sharing mutual empathy and the

understanding of what it is like to struggle. Our horses have all come from difficult and abusive situations; they are able to recognise and offer gentle respite to people who too have faced and still face daily difficulties. For the visitor, the unconditional friendship and support offered by the horse is often overwhelming and it is achieved without conversation or questioning and is a welcome break from the usual help that is on offer.



# The Dream

The quality of the environment we provide for our ponies always comes first and the happiness of our horses is essential for the work that we do with our visitors. Our horses give best when they are themselves calm, comfortable and secure. So the site itself and the area in which our horses reside is of paramount importance.

Within our herd we have a number of Shetland ponies and it is for this breed that we wished to create something bespoke – they have differing needs from our main herd in terms of forage and environment. Historically, Shetland ponies are used to the quite sparse conditions of their original habitat. Over time, these ponies have been introduced throughout the UK and to areas which do not provide the correct type of grassland to keep them in optimum health. The lush grass found in much of the UK, including Surrey, is too rich for them and can result in weight problems and health conditions such as laminitis which can cause crippling pain if not spotted and treated early.

We wished to create an area where we could ensure they have the optimum type of grass suitable for their particular needs, which in turn would help the prevention of adverse health conditions. We aimed to create an area similar to the rough, open pasture of the Shetland Isles, with a coarser grass and some natural heathland grazing. Our project included extending the horses' living area into our woodland and we realised that the vegetation that we provided was crucial – heathers, gorse, hawthorn and more would be grown and established to provide suitable forage opportunities much more suited to the breed. This plan is a unique enterprise in terms of equine care for this breed and a potential major step forward in their optimal wellbeing. We hope that our work with the Shetlands will be seen as the industry standard throughout, with others following our path.

In addition, we wished to provide seating, fencing and handrails, allowing access to the herd for our many visitors.

By creating this area with equal regard for both our horses and our visitors, we wanted to encourage all visitors to be able to observe the ponies and see them in a natural and safe setting. Access was a prime concern, given that many of our visitors have mobility problems caused by age or illness; some are wheelchair users. Therefore we planned to provide an accessible pathway suitable for all, so everyone, from the very old to the very young could experience the peace and benefits to be gained from sitting, watching and meeting the Shetlands.

It was an adventurous project and one that immediately received interest from the equine welfare industry – the health complications that we face with our Shetlands are common for many and if we could achieve our plan, we knew that it would be seen as a method of good practice that we could share with others. By bringing the premise of the habitat of the Shetland Isles to the South of England as much as was possible, we believed we could hugely benefit not only our little herd of ponies, but also encourage others to do the same.

## The Science Bit...

Grazing horses on grass or 'Doctor Grass' is the most natural and cost-effective way of keeping horses. But like everything, there is always a downside. Grass contains three sugars – glucose, fructose and unwelcome fructans, which are formed when several fructose molecules bond together.

Unlike glucose and fructose, fructans aren't digested in the stomach or small intestine and they pass into the hindgut of the horse causing the starch/sugar bacteria to go into overdrive and create lactic acid. This, in turn, causes the friendly bacteria to die, releasing toxins as well as inducing an inflammatory reaction which predisposes a horse to colic and laminitis.

Fructans levels vary with the time of year, within the plant itself and also the time of day. When the grass is growing rapidly in the spring and autumn, especially when it is sunny during the day and cold at night, the grass stores the sugar instead of using it for growth, making it available to the horse. Stressed grass (often caused by overgrazing or drought) also has higher levels of fructans. During stress the grass stores the excess sugar in the base of the stem, or on cold nights in the leaves. As sugar production is a product of photosynthesis, it rises during the day, peaking in the late afternoon/early evening which is why wise farmers mow their grass for silage in the afternoon so it has the highest sugar level possible.

Age and breed plays a role in a horses response to this increase in fructans - younger horses and more thoroughbred types are less susceptible, older and stocky breeds more so. For any horse who has a tendency to being overweight or suffering from laminitis, the need to keep them away from the fructans increases.

Obviously, none of us can control the weather and the complications that our ever-changing climate is bringing. However, by researching, sourcing and growing a lower sugar variety of grass, together with creating a laminitis paddock area for those who are particularly prone to the condition so that we had a space to hold them when the fructan levels were at their worst, we knew that we could provide a much more suitable grazing option for our Shetlands. In addition, we would introduce more shrub varieties by planting heathers and gorse, allowing the ponies a chance to forage on hardier plants and in a woodland area too.





# The Construction

**The project was never going to be a quick process – indeed, even though we have now technically completed the structure and construction of the area, it will take another couple of years for all of the plants to have fully matured and for us to see the final result.**

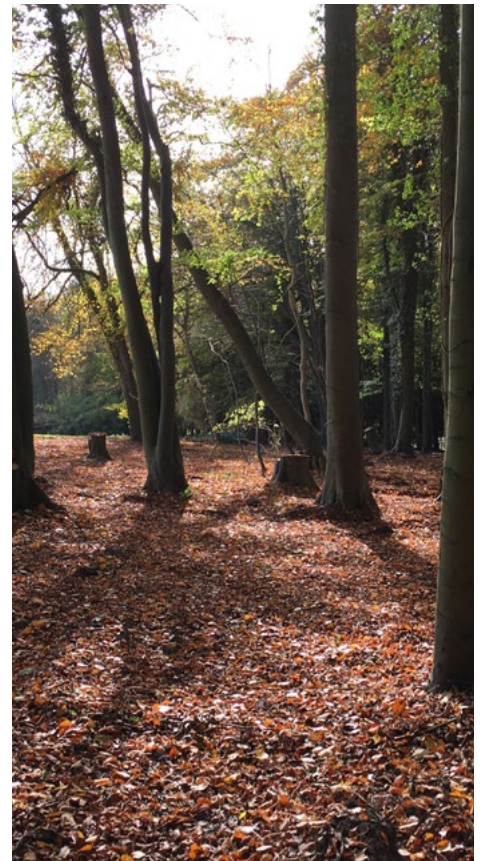
The initial choice of area on the site was easy – we had a perfect field, reached from one of the existing Sanctuary internal roads which would be accessible for visitors which also bordered an area of woodland, previously fenced off from our horses. If we opened up the woodland area, it would add foraging space for the horses.

The first job was to thin out the trees as this wooded area had been allowed to evolve itself and it had been somewhat careless in its reseedling! We were able to prioritise the removal of some trees that had toxic elements to horses including yew and sycamore; but also we thinned some of the more unstable trees allowing the younger ones to reach light more easily. Despite the need to remove some specimens (which goes against the grain for us here at the Sanctuary), the result of this work is that we have immeasurably improved the health and future of the wooded area and those varieties of trees that had previously struggled for light and water are now thriving.

We fenced the new perimeter, using stock fencing to reduce the unsightly lines of electric fencing across the site and to ensure maximum security for our smaller Shetlands. We created our paddock area with a porous hard standing surface and we built our 'meet and greet' shelter too. Accessible ramped access was put in to ensure that wheelchair users could easily reach the area and gates were hung. All of this was fairly standard work in the life of our Sanctuary and whilst it took time, effort and a lot of hole-boring, we knew it was only the start of the project.....

Throughout the year, we work hard with a farming contractor to manage and constantly improve the quality of the grazing for our herds. But here, we had to take a gamble and spray off, in its entirety, all the rich, lush Surrey grass of the field and as we watched it turn yellow and die, we had to remind ourselves that it was all in a good cause! We did a total destruction of the grass in nearly five acres knowing that the only way that we could achieve our aim was to strip the land back to nothing and start again.

Luckily, we had the services of a grass expert that researched and worked tirelessly for us in order to obtain the correct seed for us to sow as a replacement. By reducing the natural sugars in the type of grass grown, we could support our Shetland breed better. By also understanding how different weather influences the grass with regards to sweetness



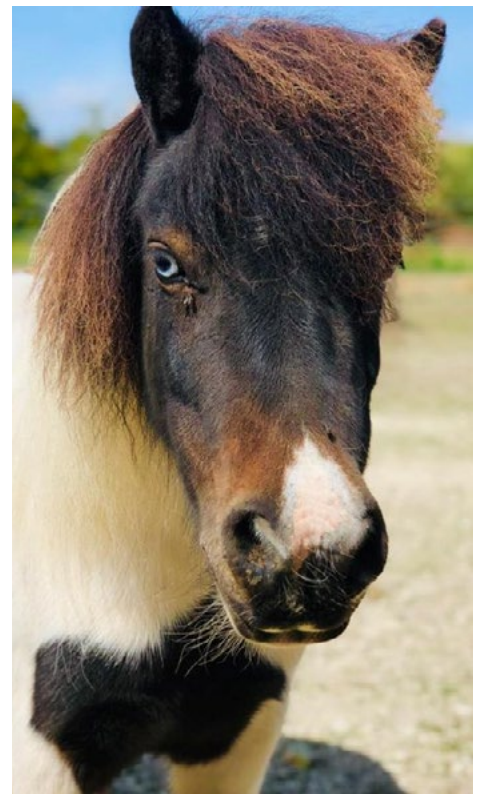


for our horses, we could learn how to manage better those horses that were more susceptible to laminitis flare ups and other health issues. We required a low sugar grass seed and we finally managed to obtain a variety that contained approximately 2.5% of sugars, when many lush varieties can contain 7-10% - certainly an impressive reduction. By grazing the Shetlands on this alternative type of grass, we would effectively put them on a low-sugar diet, akin to a weight loss programme – they would graze for the same amount of time each day and would not need to be restricted from doing so, yet they would be absorbing a lower amount of sugar without being aware of the change. The additional foraging area of woodland was also stimulation for them so whilst they would effectively live in one area of the site, they would have a more varied and interesting environment to graze during the year – increasing their exercising and encouraging exploration!

Whilst it would be nice to think that just by changing the grass, we would solve the entire problem overnight; there were a few other challenges that we had identified that needed addressing. When we fed the horses hay in winter, fragments of hay would inevitably be dropped by them and would contain seeds of the grass that had been cut as hay. Normally we would be happy for these to stay and reseed themselves; but of course, in the Shetland project, the hay would contain ‘the wrong sort of seeds’ as it would not be cut from the specialist grass and would encourage regrowth of the very grass that we had worked hard to eliminate and replace. To prevent this unwanted reseeding, we decided to create an area of porous hard-standing where we would feed hay when necessary – not only would that allow the team to clear up any loose dropped hay (and seeds) but it meant that the horses could stand and feed from our hay feeders without poaching the land around it, another recurring problem in muddy fields!

Finally, we needed to tackle the challenge that a few of our Shetlands have a susceptibility towards laminitis.

Even with all the precautions of the grass taken into consideration, the weather would still cause occasions where the grass could contain more fructans, albeit not so many. We designed within the project an area where, after we had removed the lush grass, we did not reseed. This bare area of land would become our laminitis paddock – with its own shelter and fencing, it would allow us to put any pony into the area for a few days and so take them off the grass completely. This respite from the sugary grass and our ability to monitor their food intake by feeding them controlled amounts of hay would allow us to treat the early signs of laminitis without the pony being removed into a stable away from the rest of their herd. This would be a less stressful and much more comfortable way of managing the sensitivities of the breed.





# The Opening

**By the middle of August, we were ready to hand over the Shetland project to the Shetlands and our visitors – and Mother Nature of course.**

The seeded areas and newly-planted shrubs need to establish over the next few seasons and until that time, we will not feel the full benefit of the work completed, but certainly we have done what we needed to do and the area is ready for use and is already capable of making a noticeable difference to the Sanctuary.

We hold an annual family fun day each year in August and we were delighted to incorporate the opening of the Shetland project with the event. We were even more thrilled when the legendary entertainer, Michael Crawford CBE, joined us to do the honours.

The Family fun day was hugely successful – with over 600 people visiting the site and being present for the opening, it was a super way to explain the Shetland Project to so many and for them to understand why we had chosen to embark on such a challenge.

Michael Crawford was a wonderful ambassador for the project – he had asked us for information prior to his visit about the work we had done and he integrated the details into his opening speech with the great aptitude and the humour he is renowned for! The ribbon was cut, the plaque uncovered and visitors streamed into the area.

The day was a lovely family event and the meet and greet of the Shetlands was a very popular element. Our new paddock area worked extremely well, proving to be accessible to a number of people with varying mobility issues and we received some fantastic feedback from the people who used it. The Shetlands showed their own gratitude by munching happily on the new grass, seemingly unaware of its weight watching qualities!

Our project was open for use.....



## The Funders

The creation of the Shetland Project would not have been possible without the support from a number of funding organisations. It was an ambitious set of applications that required a willingness to understand the aim of such a project and to grant money to what was essentially a calculated desire to do something different.

We are therefore immensely grateful to the following funders who took the time to understand our intentions and to offer their support to us and we hope that they share our pride in what has been achieved.

We are also very appreciative to the following companies that gave advice and offered substantial discounts on their products.



Elise Pilkington  
Charitable Trust



With thanks to



Audrey Emma Lamb  
Charitable Trust

Hatcher Animal Welfare  
Charitable Trust

Marjorie Coote Animal Charity Trust



# The Legacy

From the beginning, we always hoped that this project would benefit more than just our herd of Shetland ponies. If the theory translated into practice, this work would enable us to promote a different way of keeping this tricky breed in the traditionally lush areas of the UK and the results obtained would demonstrate the health and wellbeing advantages of changing some of the environment for other Shetland ponies too.

In order to prove the benefits, we are not going to simply rely on our narrative; instead we are taking some samples and measurements to test the theory and we will analyse the results. We have sugar testing kits for grass samples both from within the project area and also in our other fields and tracks to allow constant comparison. We will also be monitoring vital statistics of our ponies, particularly those who are prone to laminitis. We will use the results to firstly make any identified improvements to our own site; but also to substantiate the theory behind our project.

We would be happy to share these with you as the results come in over the next few months and indeed years.

**We hope that our research, enthusiasm and desire to make a difference will be proven by our results to be thought-leading and worthy of replication by others. Then our dream of improving the lives of not only our Shetland ponies but also those of others may become a reality.**

