

# Donkey WORK

*The Donkey Sanctuary works to protect donkeys worldwide, while also helping humans closer to home benefit from the gentle animals' emotional intelligence*

Words: Aly Balsom  
Photographs: Matt Austin

'Donkeys are very sensitive. They read your feelings and know how your day is going,' says Maxine Carter as she scratches Ralph between the ears and is nudged on the arm by Happiness.

The fact that Happiness has come to say hello is significant. Usually she stays well away from people and observes from a distance. She's like many of the animals that end up at The Donkey Sanctuary – they need time to learn to trust humans again.

*'It can take six months to two years to rehome a donkey', explains Maxine. 'It depends on the trauma they've been through. Laurel and Hardy were two cruelty cases we dealt with. They were in a terrible state: emaciated and covered in lice. We couldn't touch or get near them. But over time and with lots of work, we built up their confidence and trust in people.'*

Maxine is Farm Manager at The Donkey Sanctuary's Slade House Farm in Sidmouth, the international headquarters of the equine charity and one of eight of its farms around the UK. It cares for nearly 7,000 donkeys and mules in the UK, Ireland and Europe – with 210 at Sidmouth.

The Sanctuary takes in donkeys in need of assistance, which can be due to a change in their owner's circumstances or because of mistreatment. Animals that have undergone severe trauma are assigned their own groom who cares for them on a daily basis to build their trust.

### **Pair bonding**

Being around other donkeys is an important part of the process. Donkeys form close friendships and the bond between pairs is strong. If a donkey's friend dies, they can become so distressed they can become very ill, unless treated quickly.

The importance of these pair bonds means that donkeys are always rehomed in twos. Rehoming is the ultimate aim for any animal that finds its way to The Donkey Sanctuary, with all new homes carefully vetted and new guardians trained in animal husbandry. The charity retains ownership of the animals and is always on hand to help.



### Mole support

Each donkey heads to their new home with their own head collar and lead rope, supplied by Mole Valley Farmers in The Donkey Sanctuary's brand colours. The charity also sources feeders, fuel and fencing materials from Mole, as well as coat shine which is specifically needed for the Poitou or "dreadlock" donkeys. Maxine says: *'Mole Valley Farmers is our main supplier of equine products and the supplier we advise our guardians to use. We're trying to show everyone in the UK that they can buy donkey specific products.'*

*'Donkeys provide feedback on how we're behaving: if we're anxious, they pick up on it'*

### Global good

Since being founded in 1969 by Dr Elisabeth Svendsen MBE, the charity's aim has been to eradicate suffering for donkeys and mules and for their contribution to humanity to be fully valued.

The Donkey Sanctuary now works in almost 40 countries and its key priority is education, especially improving the understanding of donkey care in cultures where

people rely on the animals in order to survive. For example, in India, where donkeys are commonly hobbled (their legs tied together) the charity teaches people to use sari cloth instead of wire.

### Donkey-facilitated learning

Donkeys are so sensitive they're ideally suited to helping vulnerable children and adults as part of the charity's donkey facilitated learning programme.

The Sanctuary has six donkey assisted therapy centres across the UK which work with organisations such as CLIC Sargent and Help for Heroes' Band of Brothers and Band of Sisters, as well as engaging with children with mental health issues.

Alice Crawford works at the Sidmouth centre. She explains that donkey facilitated learning draws on the fact that the animals have an emotional intelligence which can help humans improve empathy, self esteem and manage emotions.

Donkeys are never forced to interact with participants but given the option to engage if they wish.

Alice explains: *'Donkeys provide feedback on how we're behaving: if we're anxious, they pick up on it. By understanding how the donkey is behaving, it helps the participant understand how they're feeling – and how their actions affect the donkey.'*

The process benefits human and equine alike. One well-documented case is that of Shocks, a donkey who had undergone huge physical and psychological abuse before being rescued. He worked with Amber, a child born prematurely who was not expected to walk or talk. They developed a bond which helped to heal them both. Shocks is now a happy, playful donkey and Amber walks, talks and is thriving.

### How you can help

Adopt a donkey for £3 a month and receive a pack about your donkey, watch them live on the webcam and visit them.

Fundraise or volunteer.

Buy from the online shop which supports the charity.

Become a guardian for a pair of donkeys.

Find out more at [thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk](http://thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk)

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