

# Pet Services JOURNAL

March/April 2009

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Colletts Green  
Worcester, England**

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A s s o c i a t i o n

# Lucie's Farm Ltd.

COLLETT'S GREEN, WORCESTER, ENGLAND

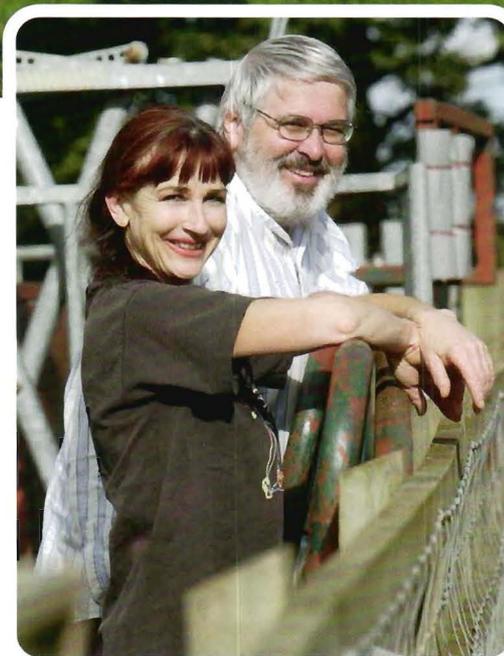
By Roxanne Hawn



The resort sits on land that includes woodlands as well as farmlands/grasslands. Dogs take walks and enjoy playtime on 17 acres of woodland trails or in the three-acre, fully fenced garden.

Marjorie and Craig Walsh initially built a small “conventional” kennel on their 57-acre farm in rural England for their three English Bull Terriers. The couple traveled frequently to oversee their check guarantee firm called Transax PLC, which had offices in the United Kingdom, France, New Zealand, and Australia. Founded in 1986, the company grew quickly and became the second largest such operation in the world within 10 years, so demands on their time expanded as well.

While the housekeeper and farm staff took good care of the dogs when the Walshes traveled, the couple decided in 1994 to hire architect Robert Lett, of Lett + Sweetland, to design and build what specs described as “the world’s best dog kennel.” Having never drafted such a facility, however, Lett struggled. So, the Walshes brought in Animal Arts/Gates Hafen Cochrane in Boulder, Colorado, to partner on the project. Upon overcoming customary planning permit issues, they hired Spicers Builders of Worcester to erect a freestanding building near the farm’s stable. Construction on the small dog resort wrapped up in 1998.



In 2004, owners Marjorie and Craig Walsh decided to provide luxury dog-care services. After receiving the appropriate licensing, they were open for business.

That same year, the Walshes sold Transax to Equifax of Atlanta, Georgia, and retired.

They began spending much more time on the farm, which meant the dogs spent all their time in the house rather than in their private resort. The couple considered converting the building into a guesthouse or a home theater, but in summer 2004, the Walshes decided to offer luxury dog boarding services instead. They applied for and received the appropriate licensing to establish a commercial operation on the farm.

### THE FACILITY

The main building features four suites, each with a raised cubby the front half of which is warmed by radiant floor heating with an individual thermostat. "The idea," explains Craig, "is that this will enable a dog to self-regulate the temperature: if cold, they can move forward; if warm, they can move backwards." Constructed from brick and reinforced concrete, the cubbies have Pilkington vitrified non-slip tiles on the floor.

Each suite measures 78 inches (198 cm) by 94 inches (239 cm) inside and about the same outside via individually fenced patios. All told, each one offers 104 square feet of space to a canine guest.

The Walshes went with double-wall, brick construction, a well-insulated ceiling and tile roof. The glass brick, east wall allows ample natural lighting and some passive solar heat into the building. In addition to the individual cubby thermostats, the resort is heated and air-conditioned.

In response to clients' requests for a larger space option, the Walshes added two bigger suites in the nearby converted stable. These suites have double-size cubbies and allow access to the fenced stable yard.

The main building includes a commercial kitchen with commercial washing machine, a shower area, and plenty of storage. It's wired with a fully monitored intruder and fire alarm system and has pan-tilt-zoom Sony web cameras that operate 24/7. In addition, someone is on site at all times.

"We have our own mini-sewage treatment plant, a Klargestar," Craig says. "It is essentially a septic tank with agitation. Fluids are pumped into the main (Severn Trent Water) sewage system. Solids are removed twice each year by a septic tank company."

The entire rural site totals 57 acres, just under four of which go with the private residence. The resort sits on the remaining land that includes woodlands as well as farmlands/grasslands. Dogs take walks and enjoy playtime in 17 acres of woodland trails or in the three-acre, fully fenced garden. The outer perimeter of the land is fenced with Gallagher electric fencing. (However, Craig says the dogs cannot reach the electric wires.)

### PET CARE AND SERVICES

Lucies Farm prides itself on saying "yes" to any client requests. "We get these (media) calls," Craig says. "People want to know neurotic things people want us to do for their dogs. And, of course, we don't consider anything neurotic. To tell you the truth, the more bizarre the request, (the more) fun for us. 'You want your dog to have flowers? What type?'"

The Walshes offer three kinds of pick-up and drop-off chauffeuring for pets, including those that live in London, which is about a 300-mile round trip:

## LUCIES FARM LTD. VITAL STATISTICS

### SERVICES:

Dog boarding, veterinary services, grooming, hydrotherapy, canine acupuncture, dog massage, dog swimming, dog photography

### NO. DOG ENCLOSURES:

6 indoor/outdoor suites

### NO. OF EMPLOYEES:

4 full-time, 2 part-time

### FEES:

50 pounds per night, off peak (about \$75 U.S.), plus a VAT (tax) of 17.5%. 65 pounds per night, peak (about \$96 U.S.), plus VAT

### IMMUNIZATION POLICY:

The facility license requires dogs be immunized based on a veterinarian's recommendations and scheduling, which typically includes the combo vaccine, but not rabies or bordatella

### CLEANING SUPPLIES:

Cromessol products (made and sold by Wallace Cameron & Co in Scotland)

### SYSTEMS AND SOFTWARE:

RezEasy (software from the human hotel industry), allows for online booking and payment of a 25 percent deposit  
Dedicated Linux server at a data center called HostMySite in Newark, Delaware  
Sage accounting software via onsite network  
Dovico Track-It software on web server to track work hours and activities  
Calcium, an online, password protected calendar and to-do list  
Norstar telephone system, which uses a router and audio recording for all calls  
Sony webcams, which broadcast live online but are not recorded  
Hand-held walkie-talkies

### WEB SITE:

[www.dog-hotel.co.uk/](http://www.dog-hotel.co.uk/) • [www.ritzcanine.com](http://www.ritzcanine.com)

### BLOG:

<http://www.doggie-blog.com>



The facility features six indoor/outdoor suites for canine guests that stay overnight.

using ESHA nutritional analysis software ([www.esh.com](http://www.esh.com)). Craig says, "She personally cooks every dish for every dog, using the best possible ingredients."

Upon checkout, each guest receives Marjorie's hand-baked cookies tied up in a package with satin ribbon. Pampered guests enjoy both home-cooked meals and cookies so much that clients often purchase both for use at home. The meals freeze for easy transport and safekeeping.

Farm staff spends three or more hours a day interacting with each dog. In addition to walks and romps in the woods or whatever playtime the dog enjoys, canine visitors can swim in a heated indoor and outdoor swimming pool. "We very much tailor this to the dog, in consultation with the owner," Craig says. "Some dogs prefer a couple of very long, fast-paced walks. Others prefer playing ball in the garden. Others may just wish to be cuddled and brushed."

All services provided to dogs are noted and tracked using the Dovico Track-It system. "So, we can (if needed—and nobody has ever asked) produce a complete diary of a guest's activities," says Craig.

Several staff members are trained in canine massage, or they can do hydrotherapy in the pool for dogs. A nearby vet provides acupuncture. Two veterinary practices are on call for emergencies. Craig, who is a professional photographer, also takes and uploads photos to Huge Mystery

## FUSSY NEIGHBOR DRAMA

The one glitch in an otherwise happy tale of Lucies Farm stems from a fussy neighbor whose small property butts up to the farm, including a long-standing access road. "If she opens her kitchen window and sticks her hand out, her hand is over my piece of land," Craig Walsh explains,

It's been this way for a long time, including when the neighbor purchased the parcel. But, tensions nonetheless ensued and resulted in complaints, investigations, and even a raid on Lucies Farm, where officials overstepped their investigative powers and entered the Walsh's private residence, which has nothing to do with the resort. In response to this raid, which turned up no wrongdoing, the Walshes have filed a lawsuit against the officials for violating their rights.

"Their warrant was faulty, and they also exceeded their authority by entering our home," Craig explains. "They didn't find we were doing anything wrong—because we weren't."

One accusation, for example, claimed a bait-and-switch operation, where clients were shown the luxury kennels but that the dogs were actually kept in another location known as "the bat cave."

The full sordid (and often ridiculous) tale is documented via blog: [www.doggie-blog.com](http://www.doggie-blog.com).



**Lucies Farm prides itself on saying "yes" to any client request. Doggy birthday party? No problem!**

Deal Productions so that owners (and others) can see and purchase photos. Lucies Farm even has equipment to shoot underwater photos.

All dogs are bathed and brushed before going home, using shower facilities and two different dryers: a standard one for breeds with regular coats and a faster one for thick-coated breeds such as Newfoundlands. A local groomer comes onsite as needed, or staff may take certain dogs requiring more complicated grooming to her parlor.

Since dogs do not comingle, there's no need for approval or screening of guests. If dogs get grumpy or growly while out on their patios, staff members can insert precut plywood barriers to block their view of one other, but Craig says, that's rarely necessary.

#### CLIENT MENTORING

Craig estimates that one-third of the farm's clients are first-time dog owners, not all of them wealthy, who sometimes suffer from what he calls "the tyranny of the breeder." By that he means, these new dog owners feel compelled and nearly paralyzed by recommendations breeders make about dog care. Take feeding tripe, for example. Craig jokes that sometimes people believe tripe is "miraculously nutritious," which prompts them to search high and low in urban areas where it's "near enough impossible" to find, so he spends a fair bit of time counseling clients and explaining things to these new and nervous dog owners, who clearly fit the dog-loving "fur-kid" model as it's known in America. "That's not to say people don't have children of their own," Craig explains.

"I spend hours on the phone talking to new customers, as almost their consultant, I guess," he says. "There is an enormous amount of guilt over leaving the dog. A lot of these people haven't been away for years. Or, if they do go on a holiday, it's here in the U.K., and they take the dog. Now, it's some external force that's making them go. And, they really have no choice. It's not their choice to leave their dog here. It's forced on them. And, it's interesting stuff."

Another common topic of conversation is the need to vaccinate for kennel cough, which Craig points out has an unfortunate name.

Such devotion isn't lost on the Walshes who sometimes think how nice it would be to get away without the dogs but then spend dinner wondering how the dogs are.

Lucies Farm encourages potential clients to visit the resort, and they often spend an hour or more looking around and talking about pet care options. Clients are encouraged to help their dogs settle in on arrival. Some clients bring nearly all their dogs possessions and bedding

along. Others don't even bring a leash, likely assuming that such a posh resort will provide for all their dog's needs. After all, you wouldn't bring your own sheets and towels to a five-star human resort, would you? "We happily handle both extremes, and everything in the middle," Craig says.

Lucies Farm has provided this personalized service to 275 customers since 2004. Of these, Craig says, "almost all of our bookings come from 125 regular customers who travel frequently."

When booking online, clients pay a 25 percent deposit by credit/debit card. It's non-refundable. Should they cancel the booking, the deposit is credited for a future stay as long as the suite can be rebooked. If not, then they forfeit the deposit. However, Craig says, "We have had (only) two cancellations since we started in late 2004."

#### MARKETING

Because the resort typically runs at 80 percent occupancy, it does no advertising—not even in the phone book.

However, in conjunction with initial construction, the Walshes hired Jeff Clark, who was then a student at the University of Oklahoma, to design a Web site for the resort. "As a student, he was keen to earn some extra money," Craig says. "He is now an Internet executive in Boston, and we can't afford him."

They tried Google AdWords, but these days their two Web sites rank relatively high in a Google search anyway.

#### SHIPPING SOLUTION

Craig believes the selection of toys and dog products in the U.S. exceeds what's available in the U.K., but he's often had



**Swimming and hydrotherapy is one of the valuable services available to canine guests.**

trouble getting companies to ship overseas. "American companies don't know there's anything outside of America," says Craig, who is from Hawaii and knows the challenges of living off the North America mainland.

To solve his shipping problem, Craig hired a firm called Voyagers Mail Forwarding in Florida, which specializes in shipping mail and other items to people who travel the world in yachts. The firm handles all the documentation required, such as the bill of lading and commercial invoice. "We have a credit card that's billed in the States," Craig says. "The bill goes to the Florida address, so they're shipping to the billing address, then the gentleman there consolidates everything and ships across to us in a single box."

**STAFFING**

Craig stays hiring and firing is always a challenge since people daydream about working with dogs. "But, in their dreams, the dogs are always clean, well behaved, and never go to the bathroom," he says. "And, it's always sunny."

Lucies Farm hires people with experience working in kennels or veterinary practices or those with a government certificate in animal care (NVQ, national vocational qualification). References are carefully checked, and successful job candidates work for a couple of days paid as a try-out before being officially hired. Staff members receive pay that is about 15-20 percent above the minimum wage, and they sometimes come from European Union countries such as Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. The Walshes recently licensed a PCSA training module and plan to see how new hires do with the course.

"To some extent, we actually like employee turnover," Craig explains. "We are a small team, with Marjorie being involved in day-to-day management. We don't really offer much of a career 'ladder' here at Lucies Farm. We find that as long as employees are properly trained, there is some

advantage to having new, enthusiastic team members. Walking dogs—particularly in the English weather—for 7.5 hours a day can be very tiring."

Resort management is hands-on work done by Marjorie. Craig is fully disabled after suffering a back fracture in 2006. He contributes by speaking with prospective customers on the phone and handling administrative functions such as webmaster duties and some bookkeeping.

**LUXURY FOCUS**

Craig explains that the real trick to doing well with a small, exclusive dog resort is to say "yes" to client requests. You simply charge more for doing so. For example, one client wanted nearly round-the-clock attention for his two Newfoundland dogs. The Lucies Farm team said "yes," along with an estimate for how much that would cost. "In the end he decided that the normal three or three-and-a-half hours were sufficient," Craig explains. "But, he made this decision—we said 'yes' to his request."

Craig admits to receiving calls from existing kennel operators who want to expand their facilities by adding luxury suites to their regular ones. "For sensible reasons, they don't wish to alienate their existing customer base," he says. "I think this is problematic. You wouldn't wish to pay to stay at the Beverly Hills Hotel or the Plaza Hotel, if it also had a Holiday Inn wing. We are proud to be a luxury dog resort—and all the guests receive the same luxury service."

The strength of their repeat bookings along with the extensive personalized attention to dogs mean that the Walshes enjoy long visits with "old friends" of the canine variety. That offsets, a bit, the long hours.

The hard work, along with the inability to expand at the present location, is what the Walshes like least. "In the check guarantee business, we could sign up new customers almost without restriction," Craig says. "But, we can't care for an increasing number of doggie guests: just what our license, and facilities, allow."

**FOR SALE**

The Walshes are ready to retire, so both their home and the farm with the dog resort on it are up for sale. "We believe we have a great name in the U.K. marketplace and are hoping someone will purchase the property and use it as a base for a small 'chain' of luxury dog resorts," Craig says. He worries the current economic climate might slow the sale.

And, planning permissions (like zoning in the U.S.) are already in place for commercial activity on the farm. The kennel license, which is applied for and issued annually as a license for the individual operator(s), "would be granted unless they were unfit people," Craig says, adding, "I think you'd have to be pretty bad to be turned down." 🐕