

A Double First at Animal Blessing

Wanda Oberman reports

Tracy the rescued donkey and Sophie the blind retriever scored a 'double first' at the Animal Blessing Service at St John Vianney Church in Wantage on Sunday 4th October.

It was the first time that either animal had been to an animal blessing service, where they joined over a hundred people of all ages and their assorted animals at the service to celebrate the feast of St Francis of Assisi and to mark World Animal Sunday. The ecumenical service was led by the parish priest Canon Peter Turbitt.

Dogs, cats, rabbits, chickens, led by Tracy the donkey, who lives at the Island Farm Donkey Sanctuary, all behaved beautifully as the congregation gave thanks and said prayers for the creatures who share our planet.

The service, attended by the Mayor of Wantage Patrick O'Leary and his family, has been held for the past 18 years and has now become a fixture on the local church calendar. Catherine Keogh a trustee from the local Island Farm Donkey Sanctuary at Brightwell cum Sotwell (near Wallingford) gave the address and emphasised the need for people to extend their friendship and responsibility to both each other and to the animals which rely on us for their well-being.

Catherine said: 'It is the first time I have been to a church service with my dogs and my blind dog Sophie's sense of well being was quite extraordinary - to find her way unaided to the foot of the altar and then lie quietly and peacefully whilst the organ played behind her and the donkey standing beside her - showed the essence of being at peace in God's house.'

It was a 'first' too for Tracy the donkey. She came as 'understudy' to Pollyanne - who has been attending the service and leading the animals for their blessing on a regular basis over the years.

Pollyanne, accompanied by the manager of the Sanctuary Mr John McLaren, is currently appearing on the stage of the Royal Opera House in London in the opera Carmen..

[A selection of photographs accompanies. Ed.]