

Providing a comfortable retirement

Service animals in the UK are not entitled to financial support when they end their careers, leaving a worrying void which must be filled. Martin Puddifer spoke to Lady Bathurst to find out more about the new charity which aims to plug the hole.

Photography: GERRY SLADE PHOTOGRAPHY

Talking to Lady Bathurst about her charity, the National Foundation for Retired Service Animals (NFRSA) is, to borrow a quote from the front cover of *Fieldsports Journal* each month, time well spent. The current custodian of Cirencester Park, the home she shares with the 9th Earl Bathurst, was heading to Crufts on the morning of our short interview, one of many events she has attended to promote the charity since its inception in May 2022.

In a nutshell, the NFRSA exists to provide grants to cover the medical and veterinary bills of former service animals (such as explosive detection dogs and police horses) who, in Lady Bathurst's eyes, "have given the best part of their lives to keep us safe".

Even a cursory glance at these animals' duties shows they are put in harm's way and then some but, despite deserving to enjoy their golden years with their devoted handlers, the stark reality is their former employers don't cover their expenses in retirement, and they have little if any chance of getting insured. It means their handlers, in whose care they have been for a number of years, could be faced with the prospect of having to give them up to avoid hefty care bills. ➔





HEARTBREAKING DECISIONS

“When these animals retire from active service, they are basically cut loose by their former employers,” explains Lady Bathurst. “It’s a shame they’re not better looked after by the public bodies with whom they once served, but given the budgetary pressures they are under, particularly the police, who have to be seen to be paying for boots on the ground, I can understand why.”

Though a realist, Lady Bathurst is acutely aware of the position in which handlers, who have a deep bond with their animals, are subsequently placed.

“Dogs are my passion, they always have been,” explains Lady Bathurst, a keen shot who works her own Gundogs on shoot days. “I’m a great supporter of our emergency services and when you meet the dog handlers you see how passionate they are about their animals. Anyone who has a working dog that they partner with, whether that’s keeping the city streets safe, helping to rescue people after a natural disaster or picking-up on a Scottish moorland, knows there is an extraordinary bond between them. It’s one I deeply admire.

“With that in mind, can you imagine how heartbreaking it must be to have to give up an animal you’ve handled for most of their life because you can’t afford to keep them? It’s a big ask and one I don’t think handlers should be asked to make. I want these handlers to know the NFRSA has their back.”

FAMOUS NAMES SUPPORTING THE CAUSE

The inspiration for setting up the NFRSA first came to Lady Bathurst back in 2016 when she served as the High Sheriff of Gloucestershire. After learning of the care challenges handlers were facing during an awards ceremony recognising the contribution animals make in policing, Lady Bathurst resolved to found a charity that would help service animals, whatever their role, once she was in a position to do so. Fast forward to now, one year after its launch at the 2022 National Police Dog Trials, and the NFRSA boasts an impressive list of ambassadors, including Minnie Driver, David Gower, Carol Vorderman and Adam Henson. The

12-strong management committee also acts as the charity’s board of trustees, who all volunteer, and a proportion of whom assess grant applications sent in by often very anxious handlers.

“Our trustees, whose number includes vets and serving police officers, do fantastic work for the NFRSA and are great at assessing the applications we receive,” explains Lady Bathurst. “If the applications are successful, we will pay up to 90 per cent of the amount owed. We feel our applicants are proud people who want to put some of their own money towards their animal’s treatment – this way, more people are likely to ask for help.”

TIGHT PURSE STRINGS

“Notoriously mean” when it comes to overheads, Lady Bathurst is proud of the fact expenses are kept to an absolute minimum and that almost all of the money raised for the NFRSA can be spent on the animals. This news will certainly comfort those who are worried about there not being enough to go around, such as a serving prison officer who emailed her ladyship expressing his relief that support will be available when his spaniel retires later this year. In order for applications to be dealt with as efficiently as possible, the NFRSA actively encourages handlers to get in touch well in advance of their animal’s retirement to build a relationship ahead of any claim being made. At the time of writing, the charity has allocated more than £17,000 in grants to help cover the costs of medical treatment or veterinary bills, with funds mostly raised at charity events.

Lady Bathurst has been humbled by the response to the NFRSA, not least since “funds are on an upward curve,” but she stresses the charity is an ally to other, longer-established organisations, such as the Essex Retired Police Dogs Fund and WAGS Retired Police Dog Charity, which serves Wiltshire, Avon & Somerset and Gloucestershire. “Organisations like these have been going for years and it’s not for me to come in and start encroaching on their good work,” explains Lady Bathurst. “We should all be supporting each other – if the NFRSA ran out of funds, I know these organisations could help us.”



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LEADING BY EXAMPLE

As the NFRSA's vibrant and enthusiastic figurehead, Lady Bathurst knows she needs to lead by example if the charity is going to be a long-term success. Ever one to roll her sleeves up, you can regularly find her visiting serving handlers and their animals across the country – mostly recently HMP Rochester in Kent and Police Dog Scotland – to raise awareness of the charity and pressing palms along the way.

“It’s a full-time job,” explains Lady Bathurst. “I was up until 2am this morning signing letters inviting people to our first birthday party. When you’re running a charity, you’re asking for people’s money and their support – two things to which I’m not entitled. It’s important to me there’s a personal touch to this charity. It’s a big commitment and if we’re going to do it, we’re going to do it properly.” Lady Bathurst adds that committee meetings are more like dinner parties where they get a lot done but also have fun. “You have to enjoy what you’re doing to get the most of it,” she says.

SCALING NEW HEIGHTS

Later this year, Lady Bathurst intends to cycle from John O’Groats to Land’s End for the NFRSA, stopping off to visit the dog and mounted sections for the four services it supports (The Police, Fire and Rescue Service/Urban Search & Rescue, the Prison Service, and Border Force) on the way down to raise awareness of the charity. Several ambassadors plan to join her for a leg of the journey, along with a host of other supporters. One of these will be Mat Dixon, the handler of Kai, a much-loved West Midlands Fire Service investigation dog who passed away shortly after being forced into early retirement following sudden sight loss linked to a brain tumour. The 10-year-old Belgian Malinois helped conduct fire investigations at hundreds of incidents and Mat set up a GoFundMe page in his memory, eventually raising over £1,700 for the NFRSA.

“At the moment we’re doing most of our fundraising ourselves, but gradually we’re receiving more donations from private individuals such as Scott Cannings from Border Force’s dog section, ➔





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who ran the recent London Marathon in our name – we’ve even got a retired police officer who is climbing to Everest base camp for us!”

While Lady Bathurst is proud of the dedicated team of trustees and ambassadors she has assembled, her ladyship knows the charity’s long-term growth also depends upon increasing the number of people involved in its activities. Her hope is that funds can eventually be gathered by satellite fundraising committees and that the charity will even be in a position to work with veterinary practices to bring down the cost of treatment. The sky, it would seem, is the limit.

THE ULTIMATE BOND

While we could have talked all day, I was acutely aware that Lady Bathurst and I had gone well beyond the 30 minutes she had allocated for our interview. We had been circling the subject of game shooting throughout our conversation, a sport she loves and still finds time to enjoy with family and friends throughout the season. It was fitting that a certain “b word” came up during her recollections of her life in

the shooting field, one which can also be applied to all handlers of service animals. You’ll know it when you see it.

“I’ve got a cocker called Maude, whose aunt, Sweep, I had for a few years,” began Lady Bathurst. “You know how you get that one dog? Sweep was mine. I remember taking her out on her first shoot. It was bucketing down and we were standing in a field of rape. She was looking at me as if to ask why we were out there. I sent her out to pick-up a bird and once she came back I told her that was why. She understood. We had such a bond. I don’t see the point of shooting without a dog by your side.”

I’d be willing to bet that Sweep and Maude are often in Lady Bathurst’s thoughts when she meets traditional gundog breeds working in airports, prisons and disaster zones, all too aware of the retirement they should have long after they have hung up their work harnesses. They certainly deserve it, along with our thanks. *GJ*

nfrsa.org.uk