



George Spinney with
his bulldog at the
Middlesex Hospital
Open Championship Dog
Show at Crystal Palace
on 3 March 1926



Animal MAGIC

Pet ownership in Britain may have soared during the Covid-19 pandemic but our love of pets is nothing new, as **Caroline Roberts** reveals

Britain's long-standing reputation as a nation of animal lovers is well deserved. The latest estimates suggest that there are 34 million pets in the country, more than 60 per cent of households own at least one, and we spend almost £8 billion a year on them. So how did we become so devoted to our furry, feathered and scaly friends?

During the 18th century, dogs were often the pet of choice, and lapdogs were fashionable among members of the aristocracy. The pampered pooches slept in plush beds, had poems composed in their honour, and their owners flirted with each other via letters that had supposedly been penned by their dogs. Unsurprisingly, they were often lampooned in the satirical press of the day.

It wasn't until the 19th century that pet ownership started to become firmly established throughout society. Perhaps it was increasing urbanisation that prompted many to crave a connection with the natural world, but the influence of

Queen Victoria played a part too. The monarch loved animals and kept numerous pets during her lifetime, including dogs, Shetland ponies, a donkey and a parrot. She was often pictured with her pets and some of her favourites even had their portraits painted by artists such as Sir Edwin Landseer, famous for his depiction of animals.

TAXING TIMES

Dogs remained the nation's pet of choice, although working-class families were less likely to own one due to the costs – a dog tax was introduced in 1796 in the hope that it would reduce the number of dogs, and help curb the spread of rabies. When the tax was replaced by the dog licence in 1867, over 1.3 million permits were issued in England and Wales, which equates to roughly one dog for every 17 people, and even this was probably an underestimate. The annual cost of 7s 6d was a significant outlay for our poorer ancestors, and it's likely that many evaded the charge. ▶

► Domestic pets were increasingly viewed as part of the family, and this is reflected in the sentimental art that was popular at the time. The faithful and sympathetic nature of the dog was a common theme, and there are many paintings featuring canines comforting the sick, the sad, and the naughty child who has been banished to the corner.

Pets were celebrated in other artistic forms too, such as in the Edinburgh statue of Greyfriars Bobby. The terrier reputedly kept vigil by his master's grave for 14 years until his death in 1872, although unfortunately it's probable that the real 'Bobby' was a stray that hung around for all the attention and scraps.

PET CEMETERIES

Families who could afford it often wanted to give their pets a decent burial and Victorian times saw a growth in pet cemeteries catering to the upper classes, such as the one established by the gatehouse of London's Hyde Park in 1881. By its closure in 1903, more than 300 pets had been buried there. Many graves bear touching epitaphs, such as "Dear Impy – Loving and Loved" and "Darling Dolly – my sunbeam, my consolation, my joy".

As well as dogs, other common



A Christmas party at Whipsnade Zoo, Bedfordshire, 1958

A dog cemetery in Bayswater, West London, c1926



pets included cats, rabbits, mice, rats, guinea pigs and exotic birds. Pet ownership was also thought to play an important role in the education of children, teaching them kindness and care for others. An article that was published in the *Leeds Mercury* in 1882 talked about the "happy family" created by a little boy's dog, cat, canary and rabbit, and the values it was teaching him, adding that if he "ever meets with a grown-up person who is discontented and ill-natured, and who seldom uses gentle words, he may be very sure that he or she was not trained from infancy to be helpful and loving and forbearing".

However, at the time there was sadly little understanding of the suffering caused by removing wild creatures from their natural habitat, and it was common to capture and tame animals such as squirrels, foxes and hedgehogs. Some families kept more unusual pets such as monkeys, perhaps bought from a dealer or brought home by a sailor. Arthur Patterson's popular book *Notes on Pet Monkeys and How to Manage Them* was

published by L Upcott Gill in 1888, prompting a review in the magazine *Hardwicke's Science Gossip* to gush, "Properly trained and looked after, there is no pet which can be so interesting or amusing as a monkey."

Many monkey owners no doubt begged to differ, and the animals were often kept chained because of their unruly behaviour. One account, collected for a Durham University research paper, tells how the first thing Toby the monkey did on being brought home was to leap onto a shelf and smash the family tea service by hurling it to the ground. He soon began to bite family members, and was eventually dispatched to a zoo.

THE MARKET FOR PETS

All manner of pets could be bought in street markets, the largest of which was Club Row Market in Bethnal Green, East London. It began as a songbird market in the early 1800s, and by the middle of the century had expanded into a number of surrounding streets. In his 1874 essay collection *The Wilds of*



London (Chatto and Windus) James Greenwood describes the chaotic Sunday-morning scene in which the church bells chimed in with the shouts of stallholders as they touted their wares.

Songbirds were very popular, and some owners entered them in singing contests held in local pubs. Greenwood describes how they were sold in the market “by dozens and hundreds – goldfinches and chaffinches chiefly, the cages that contain them tied in handkerchiefs, silk and cotton, and carried swinging in the hand, and jostling amongst the rude mob... But the most amazing part of the business was, that not only did the imprisoned and much-hustled finches continue to exist under such circumstances, but they retained perches and equanimity in the most perfect manner, and sang as they were carried.”

But awareness of animal rights and the importance of wildlife conservation was growing. The

MARIA DICKIN 1870–1951

The impressive legacy of a life devoted to helping the sick pets of the poor

Maria Dickin was born in Hackney, East London, the daughter of a Wesleyan minister. After her marriage in 1899, she dedicated herself to voluntary social work in the capital's slums. The illness of her beloved pet dog led her to consider the suffering of animals owned by the poor, who could not afford veterinary treatment. Determined to help, she opened the first People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) clinic in a Whitechapel cellar in 1917. The sign outside read, “Bring your sick animals. Do not let them suffer. All animals treated. All treatment free.” Soon people were queuing for hours with their poorly pets.

By 1927, there were 57 PDSA clinics around the country, and three mobile clinics in horse-drawn carriages. She also established a training school for veterinary students in Ilford, and launched a children's club to help them learn more about caring for their pets.



In 1943, she founded the Dickin Medal, awarded to animals that display conspicuous gallantry or devotion to duty while serving or associated with a branch of the armed forces or civil defence. Dickin published her memoir *The Cry of the Animal* seven years later. Today, her charity provides free and low-cost care to more than 470,000 animals every year.

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), the first animal-welfare charity in the world, had been founded in 1824, and it was followed by others such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)

designed to protect animals, including the 1872 Wild Birds' Preservation Act and the 1900 Wild Animals in Captivity Protection Act, which made it an offence to “cruelly abuse, infuriate, tease, or terrify” an

Some owners entered their songbirds in singing contests held in local pubs

animal. Club Row, and similar markets, were often visited by undercover

in 1889, and rescue centres such as Battersea Dogs Home, which was founded in 1860.

The second half of the 19th century also saw a series of laws

An RSPCA inspector examines a horse, c1903



officers from charities, as well as campaigners who protested loudly. Nevertheless, the market continued to sell live animals until 1983, when the sale of animals on the street was finally banned.

SOLDIERS AND STRAYS

The outbreak of the First World War posed challenges for many less well-off pet owners, and the Blue Cross, an animal charity then known as Our Dumb Friends' League, set up a fund to help soldiers who had no one to care for their dog when they went away to fight. The dogs were kept in kennels, and soldiers received regular updates on their wellbeing. The fund also enabled soldiers to bring home strays ▶



Young children play with cats, c1925

► that they had befriended while overseas. In a letter of thanks to the charity in 1920 one such soldier told of his reunion with his dog, Queenie. “I was waiting for her at the station, and... as soon as the box opened she sprang out, and when she smelt me! Well, I thought she would have gone mad; she *was* pleased... When she saw Mrs Thomas she went properly daft for a few minutes; she could not seem to believe it was true and kept smelling one and then the other and kissing us all over. I can assure you ours was a happy house last night...”

WARTIME WOE

Animal charities stepped in to help during the Second World War too, with the Blue Cross caring for more than 350,000 pets and Battersea Dogs Home looking after 145,000 dogs during the conflict. But sadly, many pets were not so lucky. Despite the best efforts of animal charities, they were unable to prevent a mass cull of about 750,000 pets. When war broke out, with the prospect of devastating bombing and food shortages, the Government wanted owners



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to prioritise themselves over their pets. Official advice was to send pets to family or friends in the countryside and, if this was impossible, it was kindest to have them destroyed. This prompted a mass panic in which people rushed to vets’ clinics and animal homes to have their pet put to sleep, often to bitterly regret it as they adapted to wartime life.

As the economy recovered and expanded following the war, there was not only a baby boom but a boom in pet ownership. People had more disposable income to spend on their pets and there was a growth in veterinary practices, with many turning their attention to the care of companion animals. Today, there’s increasing scientific evidence that pets can boost our physical and mental wellbeing, and this was certainly true during the Covid-19 pandemic, when our pets helped so many of us deal with the isolation of lockdowns. Those without companion animals are often bemused by all of the pet paraphernalia on sale, the groomers and behaviourists, and the doggy ice cream. But for us dotting owners, our pets are definitely worth it. 🐾

RESOURCES

Take your research further

ARTICLE

When John Met Benny

Julie-Marie Strange

[w tinyurl.com/john-met-benny](http://tinyurl.com/john-met-benny)

Find out about the place of pets in working-class families in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

BOOKS

Animal Companions

Ingrid H Tague

Penn State University Press, 2015

Tague’s book looks at how pets reflected and shaped cultural debates in 18th-century Britain, including the relationship between humans and animals.

At Home and Astray

Philip Howell

University of Virginia Press, 2015

Howell explains how dogs came to be at the heart of the middle-class home in Victorian Britain.

PODCAST

OF DOGS AND DUCHESSES

[w tinyurl.com/bbc-dog-duch](http://tinyurl.com/bbc-dog-duch)

This entertaining 14-minute programme from 2019 explores lapdog ownership among the 18th-century aristocracy.

RECORDS

DOG TAX AND LICENCES

[w tinyurl.com/sp-dogs](http://tinyurl.com/sp-dogs)

The free site ScotlandsPlaces has Scottish dog-tax records (1797–1798). Records for Irish dog licences are on Ancestry (1810–1926; bit.ly/anc-ire-dogs) and Findmypast (1866–1914; bit.ly/fmp-ire-dogs).

WEBSITE

PET HISTORIES

[w pethistories.wordpress.com](http://pethistories.wordpress.com)

These articles from the Pets and Family Life Project – run by Royal Holloway, and the University of Manchester – cover everything from dog-training to ships’ cats and animals in lunatic asylums.