

Dr Philip Howell  
explains how  
the humble dog  
became man's  
best friend.

PHOTOGRAPHY  
DAVID STEWART  
WINNER 2015  
TAYLOR WESSING  
PORTRAIT PRIZE

AT HOME



AND ASTRAY

**T**he advent of commercial photography in the 19th century democratised the portrait, allowing hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women to capture their own images as well as ones of those they loved. In 1843, the English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed her delight in the new medium by writing that the photograph was “the very sanctification of portraits”. She added: “It is not merely the likeness which is precious in such cases – but the association, and the sense of nearness involved in the thing... the fact of the very shadow of the person lying there fixed for ever!”

For Barrett Browning, the Daguerreotype offered the possibility of “a memorial of every Being dear to me in the world”, and as a true dog lover, she would surely have understood the demand for photographic portraits of pets that emerged in her lifetime. Although long exposure times meant that animals remained a tricky proposition (when a specific, live animal was not needed, photographic studios sometimes resorted to stuffed specimens as props), as ‘instantaneous’ camera technology developed, so did the ability to record still images of at least the more patient pets.

Pet dogs, in particular, became favourite photographic subjects. Paintings of individual and, more importantly, individualised animals pre-date the photograph, but this new technology brought the image of the pet within the reach of a much larger cohort of consumers. The *carte de visite*, dating from 1854, is perhaps the most familiar format, but later in the century postcards were even more popular, at their price of a penny or a halfpenny. These mementos of favourite animals were clearly cherished and mostly depict ordinary dogs – as obscure and undistinguished, in class terms, as their human familiars. In these photographs, with human and dog typically posed next to each other, neither animal has a pedigree, nor seems particularly to desire one. Forever fixed in the photographer’s studio, they stare out at us, and in a muted and muffled way speak to us, across the long intervening years.

Can we talk of these pet dogs as having a history? When the history of animals was first mooted many decades ago, it was only in the mean spirit of satire.

More recent research has challenged Clio’s anthropocentrism, however. Since human beings are animals too, all history is animal history, of a sort. Then there is the fact that some animals, and again the dog is pre-eminent, have been entangled with human beings for so long that any attempt to write human history without them is futile. And the evolution of the idea of the ‘pet’ – the transformation that led dogs into the photographer’s studio, to sit or stand so obediently alongside their human companions – certainly has such a history.

We can locate the pet dog reasonably precisely: the English word ‘pet’, for instance, meaning an animal kept for pleasure or companionship, seems to have been used no earlier than the 16th century, and possibly as late as the early 18th. It developed, moreover, from earlier references to indulged or spoiled children rather than to animals, so we might reasonably turn our earlier question around, and ask: when did ‘pets’ become animals? And the answer to that question, again at least in the western world, seems to indicate an even later transformation. In 18th-century England, pet dogs seem to be widespread, but were often portrayed as useless luxuries, the playthings of a corrupted aristocracy and their womenfolk. Such quintessentially ladies’ pets as lapdogs could be scorned as frivolities, fashion accessories and wasteful indulgences. Worse, they could be portrayed as a perversion of proper feelings, for a married woman’s natural affections were supposed to be directed to her husband and children, not her spaniel. As Alexander Pope put it in *The Rape of the Lock* (1712): “Not louder Shrieks to pitying Heav’n are cast,/When Husbands or when Lap-dogs breathe their last.” The pet dog entered history in the early modern period, then, but principally as a kind of monstrosity.

From there to the pet dogs with which we are familiar – pampered still, but to a rather greater degree respectable – took some time. There is a strong case to be made for a focus on the Victorian age, when the newly admired royal couple pictured their pet dogs alongside their children, as the very image of a proper family. With the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation in the 19th century, pet keeping can even be considered as a kind of lament for a lost closeness to nature. There are other milestones on the remarkable journey to the modern pet too: the first dog show was held ›

#### **OLENKA & BUBLYK**

(Previous page)  
Dr Olenka Pevny is University Lecturer in Pre-Modern East Slavic Culture. Bublyk is a four-year-old Bichon Frise. “Bublyk means powdered jelly doughnut in the Ukrainian slang of New York City. It suits him.”

#### **MARK & TOBY**

(Opposite) Sir Mark Welland is Professor of Nanotechnology and Head of Electrical Engineering. Toby is a one-year-old Miniature Schnauzer. “He enjoys ripping up cardboard boxes and sitting in front of the fire at the Hudson’s Ale House in Trumpington.”



#### ROGER & YOYO

Roger Mosey is Master of Selwyn College. Yoyo is a three-year-old basset hound. Unusually for a Master's pet, Yoyo is not a cat. "When College Council gave me permission to have a dog, as a piece of humour I was authorised to keep a Very Large Cat."

at Newcastle in 1859; pedigree dog breeding was formalised under the aegis of the Kennel Club (founded 1873); in or around 1860 the world's first dedicated mass-produced dog food, Spratt's famous 'X Patent' dog biscuits, were launched; and one of Spratt's employees, a certain Charles Cruft, was to lend his name in 1891 to the most famous dog show in the world.

However, what these Victorian developments cannot tell us much about is the meaning of the animal-human relationship. If we define pet keeping principally as an emotional bond, it is hard to be so precise about chronology. Love for pets is evident far earlier, for instance – why should pet keeping be satirised for its emotional wastefulness unless this love existed in the first place? The early 18th-century letters of Lady Isabella Wentworth, to take a well-known example, remind us of the depth of affection that owners felt towards their pets, which in Isabella's case included Fubs (a dog), Pug (rather confusingly, a monkey), and Puss (a cat, no surprise). On Fubs's death in 1708, Isabella lamented: "Sure of all of its kind there never was such a one nor never can be, so many good qualities, so much sense and good nature and cleanly and not one fault; but few human creatures had more sense". Exactly a century later Lord Byron eulogised his dead dog, Boatswain, in superficially similar terms, as "one / who possessed Beauty without Vanity / Strength without Insolence / Courage without Ferocity / and all the virtues of man without his vices". But such exemplary evidence is notoriously misleading: Byron's lines are probably those of a friend, and the aim in his epitaph is almost certainly satirical and misanthropic rather than straightforwardly sentimental.



## Dognapping illustrates how important the pet had become by the 19th century

If we want to place the pet in the Victorian age, it is perhaps better to take this ambition literally rather than figuratively, to consider the location of the pet dog (the characteristically errant cat is an obvious contrast) in the family and in the home. Charles Dickens, for example, was fêted as a great friend of animals, dogs in particular, and his love of animals was entirely of a piece with his paeans to the charms of home. Dickens's ambition, "to live in the hearts and homes of home-loving people", profoundly coloured the many pen portraits of dogs in his fiction. The emblem of a comfortable and loving home, the Victorian dog was released to become one of the family rather than a threat to its right relations.

As a living and breathing reminder of the duties of care, for instance, the dog took on a new role in the moral education of middle-class children. The focus of new animal welfare efforts, 'man's best friend' also became the animal equivalent of the host of 'rehoming' and 'rescue' charities that sprung up in the Victorian age. The founding of the Battersea Dogs & Cats Home in 1860 testifies to this desire to place the dog, as a pet, firmly in the security of the home. In an advertisement for its work, the animal welfare campaigner Frances Power Cobbe writes up the tale of her dog Hajjin in the first canine singular – lost in the streets, in fear of his life, Hajjin describes how he is rescued, brought to the Home, and happily reunited with his owner.

*Confessions of a Lost Dog* (1867) comes complete with a photograph of the putative author, captioned "photographed from life" to drive home a further point – as an ardent anti-vivisectionist Cobbe believed that advances in photographic technology had the power to capture a beloved animal's image without having to kill its subject >



**PENNY & PIPPA**

(Left) Dr Penny Watson is Senior Lecturer in Small Animal Medicine. Pippa is a 13-year-old Border Collie. "Pippa's favourite thing is chasing squirrels. Because she is so short-sighted, she spends hours watching carefully through the window to see if she can see them – although of course she never catches them!"

**RICHARD & LINUS**

(Below) Professor Richard Hunter is Regius Professor of Greek. Linus is a Sporting Lucas Terrier, a breed famed for their rat-catching abilities. However the last time Linus encountered rats he "yelped at the sight of them and eventually legged it back across the lawn to the safety of the warm kitchen". Phew.



first. Indeed, the Battersea Dogs & Cats Home regularly had to insist that none of its unclaimed animals were ever handed over to the medical schools for vivisection – the violent suffering of animals away from the home being the very antithesis of its vision of domestic security. It's a policy that continues to this day.

The construction of the private 'pet' is unthinkable, therefore, without that of the proper dog's public counterpart: the all-too-vulnerable 'lost' dog or 'stray'. Dogs in public who had wandered off from their owners faced a host of new terrors – the vivisector, for one, but the dognapper for another. Dog-snatchers were criminals who stole pets and ransomed them back to their owners, for considerable sums (it is a trade which still exists, called into being by the emotional and financial investment that pets, and particularly pedigree pets, represent). In September 1846, as Elizabeth Barrett was preparing for her secret marriage to Robert Browning, her beloved spaniel Flush was stolen from the streets for a third time – necessitating an anxious expedition to Whitechapel to pay the six guineas' ransom.

Dognapping illustrates how important the pet had become by the 19th century. It reflects the growing association between the pet dog and the middle-class home, and also the idea that dogs were 'out of place' in the public streets. This distinction between the 'pet' and the 'stray' was mutually reinforcing. It is a cruel irony, for instance, that the function of Battersea (to reunite owners with their lost dogs, particularly the pedigreed pooches) was matched by its role in clearing the public streets of the many unwanted strays, mongrels, and curs. Street dogs' lives were increasingly inauspicious: being without a home was the same as being without ownership, and without all the protections that being property conferred. The stray dog was ever more vulnerable to being policed out of the public streets, and out of this world altogether – so many dogs' homes today are forced to be, in the uncomfortable and oxymoronic modern parlance, 'kill shelters'.

By the Victorian age, then, we have something like a modern culture of pet keeping: pet dogs were everywhere, and more importantly, were mostly respectable; they were the common enthusiasm of rich and poor, but also subject to an invidious hierarchy that separated the pedigree from the mongrel; and while the lucky few were securely placed in the sanctuary of the home, the dogs of the street found their lives increasingly precarious. We can, I think, call this the age of the pet. © Cultural geographer Dr Philip Howell is a Senior Lecturer and Fellow of Emmanuel. His new book is *Home and Astray* (University of Virginia Press).