

Top Dogs and Cool Cats

The British are renowned as a nation of animal lovers. We don't so much keep pets as worship them. An Englishman's home may be his castle but the king is likely to be a dog or a cat, granted the best seat in the house, lavished with praise, care and attention and treated as a full member of the family. But in Britain dogs and cats do not simply serve as pets but are also folk heroes and celebrities, even civil servants.

One of Britain's early canine heroes was 'Greyfriars Bobby', a plucky Skye terrier who became known in 19th century Edinburgh after spending 14 years guarding his owner's grave. A statue of Scotland's very own 'Hachiko' can be seen in front of Greyfriars Bobby's pub in Edinburgh and just like his Japanese cousin, his story inspired a popular film.

Then there was Pickles, a black and white mongrel who saved the nation's blushes in 1966. The football World Cup was being staged in England and just four months before the tournament started, the solid gold trophy was stolen from a public exhibition. Pickles came to the rescue by finding the precious object, wrapped in newspaper, at the bottom of a hedge. Pickles was rewarded by being invited to the victorious England team's celebration banquet where he was allowed to lick the plates clean. Sadly, Pickles died soon after while chasing a cat.

Pets can be TV stars too. A typical example was Prince who became briefly famous due to his ability (with a little help from his owner manipulating his jaw) to say a word that sounded vaguely like 'sausages'. Judge for yourselves at <http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=DrX-Yv8gLB8>.

Cats have made their contribution too. For nearly 100 years at 10 Downing Street, official residence of the Prime Minister, a cat has been employed to catch mice, with a salary of 100 pounds a year. The official title 'Chief Mouser' was most famously held by Wilberforce who served five Prime Ministers over 17 years and caught over 1,000 mice. However, the relationship has not always been a happy one. Soon after the Blairs moved into number 10, news of a rift between the Prime Minister's wife, Cherie (known to hate cats), and the then Chief Mouser, Humphrey, emerged. In November 1997 it was announced that Humphrey had retired to the country but dark rumours circulated among a suspicious nation. Had Mrs Blair disposed of the cat? The story was front-page news for several days until a picture, apparently of Humphrey with a copy of that day's newspaper behind him, was released. But was it really Humphrey, or just a copycat? Like the Kennedy conspiracy, the truth may never be known.

Not surprisingly, given our fondness for our furry friends, English is littered with 'dog' and 'cat' expressions. Here are just a few:

If you make a mess of something, we say that you have made '*a dog's dinner (of it)*'. You can also say, '*a dog's breakfast*' but, for some reason, not '*a dog's lunch*'.

You are, '*In the doghouse*' if you have offended your partner and she (it's usually she) has stopped talking to you.

'*(His) bark is worse than (his) bite.*' is said of someone who shouts and screams when they are angry but is, at heart, a gentle person, or a '*pussycat*'.