

Nostalgia

Christmas time is the time of year when we tend to get nostalgic. And the older one gets the worse this becomes; or, perhaps you have just had more time to collect nostalgic moments. You remember Christmases past and the family and friends who share the festivities with you and for me this has to include the Staffords.

Frequently breeders and judges are asked by various publications to write about their 'favourite' Staffords, of course with the show ring in mind. Funnily enough when I go on a nostalgia spree, especially at Christmas with a few hot punches inside me, it is not the show winning Staffords, which bring tears to my eyes, but rather their less illustrious relatives who stick in my mind by the sheer force of their individual character and usually perverse behaviour. This eclipses their beauty or lack of it.

The first such Stafford that I remember was big and red and sweet faced. She was called Moira in the house and Merphor Moira on her registration papers – which was a reminder from my Mother of her attempts to teach me to read phonetically. She was extraordinarily kind but she and her brother – also red and even bigger – had the detestation of animals. In the family's ignorance these two were exercised off the lead in the absurd notion that we could control them, even on the roads. They killed chickens, a goat and numerous cat, even chasing one right into a woman's kitchen; where it took refuge on top of

her stove. Nor did we understand the destructive power of a Stafford. At one time or another Moira managed to chew up all of my favourite toys – the final straw being my teddy bear. Some kind relative took pity on me and patched it's stomach, one arm and both legs; it never looked quite the same however, since the patches were a different colour from the rest of the bear.

In spite of her misdemeanours I loved this gentle bitch. Unfortunately she met her match on the doggy front when a small red bitch took a dislike to her and set about her with determination. Yes, pre 1948 most of the the animals were NOT 18" tall! Nor were those who were tall, necessarily the winners of every fight. Moira met her match because the little red bitch was a 'leg dog' and felled poor Moira with one well aimed bite and once on the floor she was at Ginger's mercy. Moira died having her fourth litter – yes; there were also whelping problems in those days. I remember the struggles to hand rear the orphaned puppies.

The sire of this fourth litter was her grandson, my next favourite. He was actually a show dog and became the first Constones Champion. I showed him throughout his puppyhood but once competition became serious, of course he was taken over by the adults. He was a perfect gentleman. Our neighbours used to call and ask if they could take him for a walk. But a local lad lost this privilege after he had 'exercised' Bill along with his little

mongrel bitch. My father was not well pleased when some months later the lad appeared with bitch and her puppies which had the body shape of its mum but the head of a Stafford and the very distinctive marking of our dog. Bill had an extremely long life, so that I grew from child to woman under his guidance. Our second son shared the date of Bill's birthday and we couldn't resist remembering the old boy by giving his full name; William to the new baby.

Our two sons had a bitch in their infancy; Rosie. Once again we were living in the county but this time in the flat landscape of Lincolnshire. Infant and bitch could wander quite far from our home. If I ever lost sight of the toddler some neighbour would be quick to say 'I know he must be the other side of that potato field because I saw the dog'. Once we moved to suburbia however this happy idyll had to cease. Rosie had one falling out with a vicious old mongrel bitch and the whole neighbourhood was down on us like a tonne of bricks. When her grandson Rory (called after the last king of the Irish, according to my mother) escaped for a brief time and met up with a neighbour's Afgan – newly returned from the Poodle parlour – we were visited by the irate owner threatening legal action. The main problem was that his housekeeper, having absolutely no idea how to handle this highly strung pet, allowed the two dogs to circle round and round her, wrapping the very long lead tightly around her as they went. When she was finally bound like a cocoon her yells could be heard in the next street.

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Actually, all Rory wanted to do was to check that the Afgan BITCH was not in season. Fortunately having been properly introduced, Rory's mild demeanour so endeared him to the Afgan's owner that he went away meekly, sold the Afgan and reprimanded the poor housekeeper. Rory loved Christmas because he had a great fondness for chocolate if we managed to put the chocolate money up the Christmas tree to avoid his stealing it, he was not above cocking his leg on the tree in revenge!

It seems to me that nostalgia quickly turns to regret. Regret that society has become so intolerant of anything other than perfectly behaved mutt. No wonder they have to employ all those animal psychologists and things trying to explain to us what is 'natural' behaviour in a dog. Isn't it typical that the most popular item at Crufts is not a dog that catches rats or rabbits the fastest, but one which dances on two legs?

Anyway for many years we worked hard at producing Staffords that could behave themselves in the urban environment. And just as we were congratulating ourselves on this accomplishment – along came Beattie. Beattie was blessed with a beautiful head – correct in the nest and it never altered. We had many offers to buy her when she was a puppy. As a child I was always told to refuse a good offer for a puppy 'just in case'. Recently Vera Westwood told me that she had been given similar advice but more succinctly put 'pound notes don't catch distemper'. But we always ignore advice from our elders and so we turned down the lucrative offers and kept Beattie. After a few months she simply stopped growing, finishing up at around 14 ½". Even more worrying she began to develop a serious aversion to just

about anything on four legs. We had called her after Maureen Lipton's character. The only exception to this being with our Shetland pony – the two were as bad tempered as each other but would happily go for walks together around the lanes – and this with a pony who would kick out at our Border Terriers, the very breed he was meant to run alongside. I tried to show Beattie but once she roused up by some Westies in the ring next door – that breed of course can get away with making a nuisance of themselves – I quite lost control of her. Eventually someone offered me some Doctor Bachs remedy – to calm the nerves. When I asked how many to give the bitch the kind person replied 'they are not for her, they're for you!'. I would not be beaten however and for many months, with my intrepid friend Una Turner, we travelled up to the NESBTC handling classes – biscuits in our pockets and a rolled up newspaper at the ready. It was a very simple case of the carrot and the stick. Eventually I was confident enough too confident enough to take a stab at showing her again. We entered one of those middle classes, I think it was Maiden at the Notts and Derby SBT Club Championship Show. She stood, she walked and by keeping a fair distance from the other dogs and keeping her distracted with titbits, we got through the ordeal. I am sure the judge has rarely given a second prize to a more appreciative recipient. Beattie retired on a winning note. She was a terror to mate and virtually refused to part with the pups when they were due to be born. Eventually she produced the one and only living puppy on the floor in the vet's waiting room. But once pup was actually there, she transformed into the most wonderful and attentive mother – she was even caught going into our yard to spend a penny with pup in

her mouth! We found it extremely difficult to run her with any of our other Staffords.

I remember catching her tail in a drawer one day. She was obviously hurt and very shocked. Quick as a flash she turned, but although I was the closest thing in the room she made a dash across the kitchen and set about the only other dog in the room. She was quiet around the house, gentle with people, especially children and for a while even got along with her puppy. But when he was about 6 months old they both tried to get through a narrow space at the same time and immediately she started on him. She lived to over fourteen but sadly spent the latter part of her life without any doggy companions as she had gradually fallen out with them all.

After she went we sort of said 'never again' – just let us have quiet, well behaved, boring Staffords from now on. This might have happened but this Christmas will be the first with a new puppy; Olive. There is something about the quickness of Olive, a look in her eye, the way she teases the Border Terriers and is absolutely spoilt by her great-grand-father Roddy, which makes me think we may have another character in the making.

Clare Lee

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