

A brief history of man's best friend

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Man's best friend – who can resist those eyes, that wagging tail, that soft fur and that ability to be a sounding board to everything?



But how long have dogs been man's best friend and how did this relationship evolve? The evolution of dogs, wolves, foxes and jackals can be traced back 50 million years. It is likely, although not conclusively proven, the grey wolf is the ancestor of the canine. Both dogs and wolves share features that make their common ancestry (from the tomarcus – a tree-climbing, weasel-like carnivore) likely. Both:

- have 42 adult teeth
- have 4 or 5 toes on their forefeet and 4 on their hindfeet
- run on their toes and claws
- females have a 63-day gestation period
- understand and respect a pack leader

The earliest identifiable remains of a pure-bred dog are those of a Saluki, named after the town of Saluk in Yemen. Excavations of the Sumerian civilisation in Mesopotamia, dated back to 7,000BC, revealed rock carvings of dogs bearing a strong resemblance to the Saluki – the original ancestor of which is thought to have been a small-skulled desert wolf.

The earliest domesticated dog in recorded history is the Egyptian pharaoh hound. A circular disk, dating back to 4,000BC, depicts two hounds hunting gazelle. The pharaoh hound is known to have played an important role in the lives of the kings of ancient Egypt. In Egypt, dogs were often buried alongside owners – a practice also followed in ancient America by the Toltec people and later by the Aztec, whose dogs were sacrificed at funerals in the belief they would guide their masters to a better world.

Domestication



Christian Franz Paullini. Image: © Wellcome Images/Wikimedia Commons.

Prehistoric man encouraged dogs into their caves by offering them food and shelter. This led to a symbiotic relationship – dogs could help guard, work, pull sleds and aid in hunting. Selective breeding may have begun in these early days.

The importance of shepherd dogs and guard dogs were illustrated in the teachings of the Persian prophet, Zoroaster, around 3,000 years ago. Zoroaster's doctrine, which spread widely to the east, bore many references to dogs. He decreed: "If these two dogs of mine, the shepherd dog and the guard dog, pass the house of any of my faithful people, let them never be kept away from it, for no

house could exist, but for these two dogs of mine.”

The written history of domesticated dogs began with Xenophon (circa 430BC to 350BC) regarding hunting dogs. In 1685, in Nuremberg, Germany, the first canine encyclopaedia was published, *Cynographia Curiosa oder Hundebeschreibung*, by Christian Franz Paullini.

The word “pet”, with regards to dogs, was used no earlier than the 16th century and possibly as late as the 18th century. It developed from earlier references to spoiled children, rather than to animals. In 1560, a Cambridge scholar named John Caius wrote a letter in which he outlined the breeds of dog that existed in England at that time.

A quote from this letter follows: “And we also have a small race of dogs that are specially bred to be the playthings of rich and noble ladies. The smaller they are, the more perfectly suited to their purpose, which is to be carried at the breast, in the bedchamber or in the lap, when their mistresses sally forth.” So, while hunting dogs and watchdogs still predominated, the lap dog and pet had begun to make its mark.

Dogs were not always consistently popular. In 1796, a motion to introduce the first taxes on dogs in England occurred: five shillings on outdoor dogs and three shillings on indoor dogs. This led to many dogs being killed by their owners.

The first English dog show was held in Newcastle in 1859. Pedigree dog breeding was formalised under the support of The Kennel Club (founded in 1873). Around 1860, the world’s first dedicated mass-produced dog food, Spratt’s Dog Biscuits, was launched. One of Spratt’s employees, Charles Cruft, lent his name in 1891 to the most famous dog show in the world.

Rehoming and rescue charities also evolved in the Victorian era. Battersea Dogs and Cats Home opened in 1860, firmly placing the idea dogs belonged in the home environment. If a dog was not so lucky as to be homed, a host of terrors awaited it on the streets – not just starvation or abuse, but capture by the vivisector or the dognapper.

Dog snatchers frequently stole pets and ransomed them back to their owners for considerable sums of money. In 1846, Elizabeth Barrett was preparing for her secret marriage to Robert Browning, when her beloved spaniel Flush was stolen from the streets for a third time (hadn’t they heard of leads in those days?), necessitating a trip to Whitechapel to pay the six guinea ransom.

Dognapping shows how important the pet dog had become by the 19th century. It illustrates the growing association between the dog and the middle-class home, and also the idea dogs were out of place on public streets.

Royal dogs



The funeral procession of King Edward VII, featuring his favourite dog Caesar. Image: © Miyagawa/Wikimedia Commons.

Samuel Pepys recorded King Charles II spent more time playing with his dogs in the council chamber than he did on affairs of the state. According to the Guinness Book of Pet Records, Henry III of France (1551 to 1589) collected dogs as a passion and if he met a dog out and about, would arrange to have it stolen for himself. Purportedly, he had at least 2,000 dogs spread around his palaces. When he was in residence, there was never less than 100 dogs in situ – mostly toy breeds.

Edward VII's faithful fox terrier Caesar was attendant in his late master's funeral procession. Slipper, a cairn terrier given by Edward VIII to Wallis Simpson, featured largely in their courtship correspondence. Also, Queen Elizabeth II is rarely photographed at home without a few corgis at her ankles.

Licences

Dog licences and the practice of taxing tags have a long and international history. Dog licences were documented in Utrecht, the Netherlands, as early as 1446 and evidence exists dogs were taxed in Germany by 1598. One of the oldest known surviving dog licences dates from 1775 and is from Rostock, Germany. The fact dogs required licensing at all is testimony to their unique relationship with man.

In Great Britain, dog licensing was abolished in 1987. Prior to this, they were mandatory, but this was widely ignored, with only about half of owners having one.

Today



Image: © Philafrenzy/Wikimedia Commons.

Now, one in four British households owns a dog. A survey by Crufts' sponsor Samsung found the average dog owner splashes out around £1,000 a year on his or her pet.

Out of the 1,500 dog owners polled, 56% would mourn the death of their dog more than that of an extended family member, 24% had a social media profile for their dog and 85% considered their dog to be a member of the family.

A third of Britain's dogs have their own designated chair in the living room and one in two people admitted their dog's needs had influenced a major life decision, such as where they lived or what job they had.

We have a better understanding nowadays of animals' intelligence and needs. More pets in Britain are insured today than before, showing pet owners are taking their responsibilities as pet owners seriously. Most owners appreciate animals deserve the five freedoms, even if they couldn't name them specifically. Freedom:

- from hunger and thirst
- from discomfort
- from fear and distress
- from pain, injury and disease
- to behave normally

Nowadays, the roles of dogs are increasingly diverse; they are not necessarily just pets – dogs herd livestock, aid hunters, guard homes, and perform police and rescue work. There are guide dogs for the blind, hearing dogs for the deaf, diabetic detection dogs and even epileptic detection

dogs – poignant roles for man's long-standing best friend.

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