

What Folly is This? Animal Welfare In Georgian London

by Lucy Inglis

The cruel treatment of animals is a sad constant even now, but dramatic changes during London's Georgian period show the emergence of a modern sensibility towards animals and their welfare.

Bankside had long been the site of London's bear-baiting venues. The Elizabethan court were particularly keen on this cruel sport. Bankside was a popular destination on Sundays where crowds of both rich and poor spectators gathered to place wagers on the unfortunate contestants, though not everyone agreed it was an acceptable pastime.

*What folly is this, to keep with danger
A great mastive dog, and fowle ouglie bear;
And to this and end, to see them two fight,
With terrible tearings, a full ouglie sight.*

Bear baiting was prohibited under the Puritans and only hare coursing remained as a dog-based sport that could be done on foot. Upon the Restoration, the Bankside Bear-garden cranked back into life, but Charles did not encourage the sport. Cock-throwing (stones or bottles at a cockerel tied to a stake), dog-fighting and dog versus rats matches abounded throughout. Bandogs were a frightening pit-bull relative, bred in Clerkenwell and used specifically for baiting the larger animals. But tastes were changing and soon spectators wanted to see bears perform rather than die. The bandogs needed new targets, such as the elderly lion baited to death on Bankside in February 1675, and the Earl of Rochester's 'savage' horse to be 'baited to death, of a most vast strength and greatness'. Approximately 19 hands high, the horse stood six feet three inches at the shoulders had destroyed 'several horses and other cattel', and had been responsible for human fatalities, allegedly. Rochester had sold him to the Marquis of Dorchester, but the horse then hurt his keeper and was sold to a brewer, who put him to a dray. Soon he was breaking his halter and carting the fully laden wagon off behind him in order to attack people in the street, 'monstrously tearing at their flesh, and eating it, the like whereof hath hardly been seen'. Realistically there was no option but to destroy this particular animal. Baiting was not the humane way of doing it, but nevertheless, the horse was put to the dogs for 'the divertisement of his Excellency the Embassadour from the Emperour of Fez and Morocco; many of the nobility and gentry that knew the horse, and several mischiefs done by him, designing to be present'.

The horse was put to the dogs in the ramshackle Hope Theatre, a Jacobean playhouse which was been taken over exclusively for bloodsports. It killed or maimed them, all. The owner decided to stop the contest, but the crowd became a mob, demanding to see the horse baited to the death and started to pull the tiles from the roof of the theatre and the dogs were 'once more set upon him; but they not being able to overcome him, he was run through with a sword, and dyed'. The ambassador failed to attend owing to inclement weather.



The First Stage of Cruelty, 1751, by William Hogarth (1697 - 1764)

By the turn of the eighteenth century, baiting was moving north of the river, to Hockley in the Hole in Clerkenwell, where in 1710 there was 'a match to be fought by two dogs, one from Newgate-market, against one from Honey-lane market, at a bull...which goes fairest and fastest in, wins all. Likewise, a green bull to be baited, which was never baited before; and a bull to be turned loose with fireworks all over him. Also a mad ass to be baited. With a variety of bull-baiting and bear-baiting, and a dog to be drawn up with fireworks. To begin exactly at three of the clock.' Hockley was the centre of bull terrier breeding in London, and so perhaps it is natural that the sport would move there. In 1756 Hockley disappeared with the continuing Fleet development, and bull-baiting moved to Spitalfields. It did not stay there for long as it became increasingly unpopular and was soon confined almost exclusively market towns.

At the same time, Hogarth campaigning against the 'barbarous treatment of animals, the very sight of which renders the streets of our metropolis so distressing to every feeling mind'. His work the Four Stages of Cruelty connected the cruel treatment of animals with the degenerate mind, whilst sensitivity was to be applauded. The first plate of the Four Stages features Tom Nero attempting to force an arrow into a dog's anus, and another youth pleading with him not to.

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What Folly is This? Animal Welfare in Georgian London (cont.)

*Learn from this fair Example—
You Whom savage Sports delight,
How Cruelty disgusts the view,
While Pity charms the sight.*

Attitudes towards animals and animal cruelty were changing in London. Pets had always been particularly popular in the city, with most households having a dog and at least one cat. And surveys conducted in London between the 1730s and 1750s show that ownership of unusual pets was spread across the social classes, with around a third owned by the artisan classes, including Mr Bradbury the apothecary with his mongoose, Mr Scarlet the optician with his Jeroba, and Mrs Kennon the midwife with her ring-tailed lemur and marmoset.

The barbaric sports were becoming less popular. In 1785 it was reported that 'a fine horse, brought at great expense from Arabia, would be delightfully worried to death by dogs, in an inclosure near the Adam and Eve, in Tottenham-court-road; and to exclude low company, every admission-ticket was to cost half-a-guinea. But the interposition of the magistrates, who doubted of the innocence, or of the wisdom of training dogs and horses to mutual enmity, put a stop for once to that superfine exhibition.'

In 1822 the Act to Prevent the Cruel and Improper Treatment of Cattle was passed. It was known as Martin's Act. Richard Martin was a politician and campaigner for animal rights who brought Bill Burns, a costermonger to trial for abusing his donkey. Deploying



The Trial of Bill Burns.

shock tactics, Martin brought the donkey into the courtroom so its injuries could be seen. Burns was subsequently the first man to be convicted for animal cruelty. In 1824 in Old Slaughter's coffeehouse on St Martin's Lane, a group of men met with the idea of forming a new society concerned with enforcing Martin's Act and heightening awareness of animal welfare. They were headed by the Reverend Arthur Broome and included Richard Martin, Lewis Gompertz and William Wilberforce. This society would soon have a new name: the RSPCA.

About Lucy Inglis

Lucy Inglis is a writer and blogger who is widely recognised as a leading expert on life in 18th Century London. She appears frequently on TV, radio, podcasts and at conferences and seminars. Her popular web site - www.georgianlondon.com - the largest study of 18C London freely available online, was voted 'History Website of 2009' by the online readers of History Today magazine. It continues to educate and entertain, going from strength to strength.