

CHURCHILL'S CAT AND OTHER ENGLISH CATS

Ingrid Karnoe



Mrs. Karnoe

During even a few weeks holiday in England a cat lover will soon discover that England is a real "cat country". You meet lots of cats everywhere and even stray cats seem to be well treated. When you meet a cat and call "Pussy", the cat will come to you. If it is a house pet it expects you to speak to it again, stroke it and perhaps pick it up. If the cat is a stray it probably comes to you hoping for something eatable, and even if you do not succeed in touching it, it is not exactly afraid of you and does not disappear. In several other countries stray cats run as soon as they meet human beings, and it is not difficult to guess why.

During my summer holidays in England I met many cats, castle and museum cats, railway cats, house pets and strays in cities and in the country, pedigree cats—several times in a London suburb I met a grand Siamese strutting along a quiet road—but all the cats had a look of never being hunted. They felt undoubtedly that they all had a right to live and that the two-legged respected them and looked after them.

"The Star" among the holiday cats was decidedly Sir Winston Churchill's cat **Jock**, a lovely large red tabby or as they say in England: a marmalade cat or a ginger cat. Chartwell, Churchill's private home for 40 years, was opened in 1966 to the public and visited by about 150,000 people during the first five months. It is situated near the village Westerham in Kent and is surrounded by a lovely park created by Lady Churchill. The house was



Churchill's Cat Jock

bought and presented to the National Trust by a group of Sir Winston's friends as a memorial to him. There is a strong atmosphere of the previous owner, and it is a real home with physical reminders to see and on which the visitors' imagination can work. In the studio in the garden you find his last unfinished painting on the easel, his stained overall is on the chair—and even a glass of whiskey is at hand. You feel that any moment the great old man will peep round the corner saying: "What are you doing here?"

Walking round the house we noticed a large beautiful red tabby which seemed to belong to the place and allowed us to stroke him. A smaller cat of the same kind, only a big kitten, was also seen jumping about in the house. In Churchill's interesting study a lady was sitting; When I asked about the cats she explained: "The big cat is **Jock** — Churchill's own beloved cat. He got it as a kitten from a R.S.P.C.A. home (the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). He devoted time to Jock and when he was going to London by car he would not leave until Jock was found and placed next to him on the rear seat. Jock is a fine cat and we all love him and he will certainly stay here as long as he lives. We really don't know the small cat, but it has been here for some time and may be related to Jock! He is rather jealous of the little one, I think, and shows that he is the master of the house, but he lets it eat in peace and run about all over the place." It appeared that the pleasant lady was Churchill's secretary for 33 years and now in charge of the house. She told me that Churchill loved animals and was able to gain their confidence. At Chartwell he kept Australian black swans, Canadian geese and a succession of dogs and cats. One of his marmelade cats had the honour of being drawn by the famous artist William Nicholson.

For years Churchill was the proud owner of a brown poodle named **Rufus**. When the dog died Churchill was most distressed and believed everybody else in the house to be just as unhappy. One day he said to his secretary—to console her—that he would present her with a black miniature poodle, and soon afterwards he gave her a beautiful pedigree puppy. Drily she added: "Sir Winston never realized that I much prefer cats! But it is a lovely little dog and I am very fond of him. Would you like to see him?" She opened a door marked "Private", called up the stairs and the little poodle rushed down and jumped happily round her. He was lifted up to greet us.

A small path in the garden leads to the goldfish pond. Churchill's garden chair is still there, and he often came to sit in contemplation while feeding his goldfish.

Later that day we drove to Sissinghurst Castle to see the famous gardens created by the authoress Vita Sackville-West (born at Knole Castle). Entering the gateway a lovely big silver tabby met us and let me lift him up—he even purred contentedly. The ticket lady told us smilingly that **Toby** belonged to the castle and was a respected member of the household.

At the inn where we stayed overnight they had a tiny black cat

Blackie which seemed even smaller because the innkeeper also owned a really huge Grand Danois dog. In Denmark we say Grand Danois, but in England it is—of course—a Great Dane!

In Sussex we visited two young couples and in each house there were sweet children and a beloved longhaired cat. The three-coloured **Mr. Bunty** was a real beauty and let us admire him in his favourite place: on top of the dishwasher. In his house there was also a dog and—outside—a pet goat named Annabella, but **Mr. Bunty** firmly believed that he was much superior to the other animals.

One day we visited the cat judge Miss Val Prentis in Hove near Brighton. She came to Copenhagen in April 1967 to judge shorthairs at RACEKATTEN's show. Her little house is ruled by the fourteen year old longhaired cat **Winkle** and a young Siamese sire **Jonathan**, and they allow the tiny Maltese terrier **Bobby** to live there also. A cat breeder from the North of England paid a surprise visit with her husband, and during tea the subject was cats, cats and cats . . .

Miss Prentis took us to see the Royal Pavilion in Brighton, a strange building in a sort of Indian "Tivoli-style", built in 1621 by the Prince of Wales, later George IV. Here we noticed a cat rushing up the stairs to the museum rooms. We had a little chat with it, but never found out whether it belonged to the place.

Near Salisbury Cathedral a beautiful private garden was open to the public the day we were there and it turned out to be a real fairy tale garden with masses of wonderful flowers, especially exquisite roses. At the end of the garden on the River Avon we spotted a couple of swans with ten cygnets, and we were told there had been twelve! In the garden we met a little old lady with her cat on a lead. It resulted in a cat chat and we heard all about her eleven year old **Kitty**. Every day the two of them walked in this lovely garden — by special permission. Kitty was a silver tabby, beautifully kept, and while we talked she rolled in ecstasy under a large catnip plant. That reminds me in England lots of shops including local grocers sell small mice made of cloth and stuffed with catnip.

In Salisbury we also visited a small mansion house open to the public on certain days. It was a lovely summer day and the front door was kept open. Just inside the ticket lady was sitting and while we paid, a pretty little long-haired cat rushed past us, crossed the hall and shot upstairs. The ticket lady shook her head and smiled: "I don't know that little fellow, and actually it is not allowed indoors, but it comes very often when the door is open. I do hope it will not scratch the silk on the furniture upstairs." But nobody fetched Pussy and threw it out.

Late one night in London we left the underground train. As we delivered our tickets an exceptionally beautiful silver tabby passed us coming from the platform and went into the ticket collector's room. We asked to be allowed to see the cat and was told that it was the railway cat **Minnie** which belonged to the station and was on the pay roll as

many other railway cats in England. In other words, Minnie was a civil servant and the ticket collector spent her weekly wages on food and milk for her. She knew how to avoid the trains and she was a trustworthy worker keeping mice and rats away from the station buildings.

One afternoon I had a cup of tea in a small tea place near Piccadilly Circus. A smartly dressed elderly lady sat at my table and we exchanged a few words. In no time we found out that we were both cat lovers, and she told me her life story. As newly married she and her husband left England and settled down in Durban in South Africa. They prospered and visited old England every fifth year. In a big house she kept cats, but after her husband's death she moved to a flat and found out too late that she was not allowed to keep a cat there. Now she was visiting England and walked alone for hours in London every day. It was almost unbelievable that she had passed 80. When I told her about my visit to Churchill's home and meeting Jock, she declared immediately: "I must see that cat! I admired Churchill immensely and must also see the place where he lived. Will you please tell me how I get there—preferably to-day." It was too late to go so I persuaded her to book a seat in a tourist bus to Chartwell the next day. Arm in arm we walked towards Piccadilly and when I saw her across the busy Circus to a bus she said good-bye with a big smile: "Isn't it strange, but you know cat lovers do always find each other, and I'm so happy I met you so that I could hear about cats in Denmark and about Churchill's cat—you don't know how I'm looking forward to seeing Jock—just as much as seeing the house and garden." Then her bus came and there was no time to exchange names and addresses.

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From childhood I have had cats, tabby household pets. While Denmark was occupied by the Germans I was in London working at the Danish Embassy as a secretary. My fiancée was in Copenhagen all that time—6 years. I got safely through all the bombing of London, and upon my return we married. We soon got a cat, a tabby, who ran away when we moved. The next tabby was a beauty and during 10 years he got 12 prizes of honours at cat shows. Since then I have had Siamese, an Abyssinian and now have a neutered Siamese, Simba, with the bluest eyes in Denmark. I did start breeding Siamese, but had to stop it as I could hardly part with the lovely kittens! I have been a member of the Danish club RACEKATTEN for 20 years and during the last few years I have taken care of the English correspondence and work as interpreter at our shows. During the winter season our club arranges several social meetings for the members. In January 1969 I translated into Danish the American book THE CAT YOU CARE FOR. I collect porcelain cat figures and books about cats. I have had a parttime secretarial job since the war and am now again an embassy secretary.