

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DANES

by Jill Evans

The European wild boar of long ago was a huge bristly bad-tempered beast with sharp tusks, weighing some 400 lbs or more. These animals regularly smashed through dense forests, endangering people and decimating the local fauna. In the middle ages aristocrats considered it great sport to bag thousands of wild boar in huge hunts such as one held in the Reinhard forest area north of Frankfurt in 1563, when nearly 2600 boar of all ages were captured. Accompanying the titled hunters on horseback were troops of the local villagers acting as beaters, and packs of several hundred giant dogs of great agility, courage, strength and perseverance. These dogs were kept in kennels and were frequently exchanged between princely estates in England, Germany, and other places, possibly even Denmark, and it's generally accepted that those mediaeval boarhounds are probably the ancestors of today's Great Dane. They often wore protective padded coats for the hunt which were reinforced with whalebone, and their ears were cropped short so that they wouldn't be torn off by the angry boar or ripped in the forest's underbrush. After their dangerous excursions some of the survivors were even cherished as housedogs. Count Philipp the Generous of Hessen was reported to keep some of his English imports "in the room with him at all times," particularly a young dog called Weckuff he was very fond of, which was "white with a red spot on the ear and hind legs." The largest and best of these dogs wore gilded collars lined with velvet and were known as *Kammerhunde* (Chamber Dogs), and the second best had collars of silver and were called *Liebhunde* (Beloved Dogs.) The forebears of these fabled "*Hatzrüden*" are lost in antiquity but dogs of similar appearance are found in artworks, coins and the like from almost all over the world, going back to time immemorial. Some of the earliest are Egyptian tomb carvings about five thousand years old, of dogs remarkably like the Great Dane.

Those boarhounds of the middle ages were not all of one type, according to paintings and tapestries of the time. Some were coarse wire-haired dogs with fringed ears and some were smooth-haired and had fairly pointed muzzles and houndy ears. Still others were more like enormous terriers in appearance and others were very much in between in conformation - smooth coated and substantial, with a heavy head, square muzzle and erect ears cropped very short - in other words, very much like the Danes first registered in England and Germany in the late 1800s. All were giants, and their colours ran the gamut of what appears in modern Danes and then some. Nobody really knows what breeds were mixed to produce these dogs, but there is conjecture that the extinct Irish Greyhound, rough-coated "Mastins", houndlike "Alaunts", the bulky Tibetan Mastiff and ancient Assyrian "battle-dogs" made contributions, along with hairier heavy breeds like the Molossian Hound of antiquity. The harlequin pattern is likely a donation from the long-gone Egyptian Greyhound.

Dane predecessors were not only used for chasing the wild boar. They also hunted wolves, wild cattle and stag, and went to war in Roman times as well as later, as shown in the tapestry of Marlborough's siege of Blenheim in 1704, which shows Lord Cadogan's Great Dane. The Romans also staged spectacles where huge dogs were pitted against each other or animals such as bears in fights. In Sweden and Denmark tall dogs, "usually a light slaty-blue" were used in pairs to assist elk-finders. Dane-like dogs have also been used through the ages for gentler pursuits, such as to pull carts and of course to act as watchdogs. The story goes that they will let an intruder *in* but not *out*, unless given an okay by the owner.

As time passed the wild boar became scarce so boarhound packs were not needed any more, and the last rather coarse example in Germany was sold in 1876. But even earlier, in 1800, Sydenham Edwards had written that the more refined members of this breed were also used as carriage dogs to precede the entourage of the noble and wealthy. Only the most exalted rated the "Danish Dog," while the coach dog for the less important was the Dalmatian - "the humble attendant of the servants and horses." The Dane was described as up to 31" high, in form between the greyhound and mastiff, and "colour sandy-red or pale fallow, with often a blaze of white on the face" or "a beautiful variety called the harlequin Dane," with a "finely marked coat, with large and small spots of black, grey, liver-colour, or sandy-red, upon a white ground; the two former often have tan-coloured spots about

the face and legs.." He adds "I certainly think no equipage can have arrived at its acme of grandeur until a couple of harlequin Danes precede the pomp."

Another use for a Dane-like dog was described long ago by the British Colonel H. Smith, who described a "drover- or cattle-dog" in Cuba and "Terra-Firma." He considered this to be related to the feral dog of San Domingo, a wild representative of the Dane family. This native of the Western Hemisphere had the shape of a Dane but was wolf-coloured with a black spot over each eye and a rough coat, and Col. Smith's description of its use follows:

"We have often witnessed, when vessels with live stock arrive in our West India colonies, and the oxen are hoisted out by a sling passed round the base of their horns, the great assistance they afford to bring them to land. For, when the ox first suspended by the head is lowered, and allowed to fall into the water, men generally swim and guide it by the horns; but at other times this service is performed by one or two dogs, who catching the bewildered animal by the ears, one on each side, force it to swim in the direction of the landing-place, and instantly release their hold when they feel it touches the ground, for then the beast naturally walks up the shore."

The development of the modern pure-bred Great Dane began in about the middle of the 19th century, which also saw the advent of competitive dog shows in England and on the Continent. These grew enormously and in 1887 the Stuttgart show had an entry of 300 Danes. A preliminary standard for the breed had been drawn up in Germany in 1800, and in that country its popularity may have been influenced by the fact that the Chancellor, Prince Otto von Bismarck (born in 1815) was a great fancier and had owned several Danes from his early youth onward, the most famous of which was a blue dog called Tyras. Later in the century the Dane was adopted as Germany's "National Dog" and its various names were discarded in favour of *Deutsche Doggen* (German Mastiff) in that country. Strangely, in France the name *Dogue Allemand* is used now, a direct translation of the German, and the French name *Grand Danois* (Great Dane) is only used in Scandinavia and Quebec. Italy calls the breed the *Alano* - a legacy of the Alaunt?

In England Great Dane breeding records can be traced back to a bitch whelped in 1830 called Lukey's Old Bob-Tailed Countess, although interestingly enough Mr. Lukey was better known for his Mastiff breeding, and there is a "Lukey's Countess" in a Mastiff pedigree of that same time. Great Danes *were* being used then to develop the Mastiff, and there is some indication that the cross worked both ways.

The world's first Great Dane Club was formed in England in about 1883. Next came the German Deutsche Doggen-Club in 1888, followed a year later by the Great Dane Club of America whose members had been importing mainly from Germany. Unfortunately many of the earliest imports of around 1880 were described as being "a bad-tempered lot", and resulted in the breed's being banned from shows for several years, but by the time the GDCA was formed the "Apollo of dogs" had developed the gentle demeanour he is supposed to have.

The group of German admirers from all walks of life who met in Berlin to set up the Deutsche Doggen-Club must be given credit for their thoroughness and persistence in setting a written standard for the breed, selectively developing pure-bred Danes toward the ideal, and keeping detailed records of their progress, complete with pictures. At that time the dogs in the North had been heavy, coarse, and aggressive, while the Southern variety was slender, elegant and somewhat more timid. The standard was set between the two types and only prize-winners could be registered in the Studbook. Among these pioneering men was Max Hartenstein of Plauen in the east, who had owned and bred many prize-winners beginning in 1874, although few were ever registered. Another was Ed. Messter of Nill, in the north, and his brindle dog **Nero I 609**, whelped in 1876, is considered the principal progenitor of the modern Great Dane because nearly all pedigrees of all colours eventually lead back to him. And the Berliner, Fritz Kirschbaum, mustn't be overlooked because not only did this man breed generations of outstanding Danes but he was a conscientious and hardworking Studbook Chairman in the earliest

days, a respected international judge who even travelled to the U.S.A. in 1908, and the contributor of many valuable articles helpful to novice breeders, containing advice still pertinent today!

In the late 19th century England lost many dogs to a rabies scare and for some time before World War I had been importing outstanding stock from the Continent and breeding to their long-established British lines with great success. Great Danes were no exception. But in 1895 the Prince of Wales (who was to become King Edward VII) asked that ear-cropping be discontinued. Although no such law was passed, the Kennel Club agreed that no cropped dog could be shown or registered, and this at first was a big blow to Dane breeders. However, some die-hards rallied and countered by breeding for neat, small, expressive ears which would not detract from the "look of dash and daring" called for in the British Standard.

After WW1 an enormous effort was necessary to revitalize the Great Dane everywhere, which had suffered greatly from food shortages and other exigencies of war. Some obviously pure-bred Danes were found wandering loose in Germany and rescued, and if they passed muster from a panel of judges they were deemed *findling* (foundlings) and accepted for conditional registration, often producing superbly in justification of their unknown heritage. Hard times in Germany continued into the twenties with its horrendous inflation, yet curiously this was a defining point for the breed when a spectacular family of nearly perfect and prepotent Danes arrived at the **von der Saalburg** kennels of Karl Färber in Bad Homburg. The mating of the brindle bitch **Fauna Moguntia** of the elegant and tightly bred **Hansa** line to the golden fawn dog **Ch. Bosko vd Saalburg**, a descendant of the beautiful fawn **Ch. Primas vd Rheinschanze**, produced the glorious brindle **Ch. Dolf vd Saalburg** in 1924, who could probably hold his own in the show ring even now. The legacy of these Danes throughout the world is incalculable and has set type in all colours to the present day.

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