

# HISTORY



## The Basset Hound History

In his definitive book on *The Basset Hound*, the late George Johnson traces the Basset's colourful development through the hunting packs of medieval France, where long-bodied, short-legged hounds were bred to follow everything from rabbits to stags. It's near-impossible to summarise his comprehensive and fascinating exploration of the breed's history, and *The Basset Hound* is an indispensable starting point for anyone who's ever wondered why their dog's tail has that white point at the end.

The Basset hound's serene manner perhaps comes from its earliest origins - in a monastery. **St Hubert (AD 656-727)** was a French nobleman who was startled into holy orders by a stag bearing a cross in its antlers while out hunting in the Ardennes region on a Sunday. Hubert dedicated the rest of his life to God, and breeding the perfect dog for tracking game.

St Hubert's brave, low-slung scenthounds were popular with the aristocracy, and first appear in print in **Turbeville's *Art of Venerie* (1576)**. They already sound familiar: 'St Huberts are mighty of body, legs low and short, not swift, but very good on scent'. They were also known as **Talbots**, and the many Norman English family arms displaying Talbots (not to mention the number of English pub names) suggest that hounds were brought over at the time of the Conquest by influential French noblemen. Their short legs meant huntsmen could follow easily on foot, while their powerful noses, aided by the scent-trapping heavy ears and wrinkles, gave them unmatched tracking ability.

Over the centuries, French regional variations of the St Hubert evolved to deal with different sized quarry and varying terrain, and in **1585**, the first mention of the word 'basset' or 'low' appears, in **Jacques de Fouilloux's *Venerie***, describing a hound used to hunt badgers. He notes two types - a crooked-legged, smooth-coated hound that works best in undergrowth, and a straight-legged, rough-

coated hound, an early **Griffon Basset**, which was better at running. The woodcut accompanying the description is of two sturdy-looking dogs with short front legs, high-set long ears, and tails carried up in the traditional hound fashion.

Around the same time, the Basset hound makes a cameo appearance in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1598), when Theseus describes his hunting pack:

My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind

So flew'd; so sanded; and their heads are hung

With ears that sweep away the morning dew;

Crook-knee'd, and dew-lapt like Thessalian Bulls;

Slow in pursuit, but matcht in mouth like bells,

Each under each. A cry more tuneable

Was never holla'd to nor cheer'd with horn.'

Although not mentioned by name, the characteristic dewlaps, crooked legs, low-hanging lips ('flew's') as well as the lovely baying note, suggest they're close Basset relations. And as Hippolyta says, clearly a hound lover, 'I never heard/So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.' (Strangely, she makes no mention of their 'bemuddi'd paws' or 'slobber'd jowls'.)

As forms of hunting changed to include shooting, the Basset's sure-footedness in the rough allowed hounds to find, then flush game steadily from the undergrowth, driving them at slow speeds the marksmen had better chance of hitting. The breed's popularity spread through France, where both hunting and hound-breeding was taken very seriously by the ruling classes.

2011



Smile kid, we could be famous



He's ridden orf and left me!



Yurch, its wet, its soft its not green

In the mid-1780s, **the Marquis de Lafayette** sent 'seven massive hounds' to his friend **George Washington**, another keen breeder – they were apparently so fierce, they had to be separated at meal times.

Unfortunately, the **French Revolution** put an abrupt end to the ruling classes, and also to their kennels. Many strains became extinct, including the St Hubert, and over time, the remaining varieties of Basset dwindled to just two, the **Basset Artesien-Normand**, and the **Basset Griffon-Vendéen**.

The Basset as we know it today arrived officially in Great Britain in 1866. Basset and Belle were imported from the well-respected kennels of Count le Coulteux de Canteleu, a famous French hound enthusiast. Their new owner, Lord Galway, described them: "They were long, low hounds, shaped much like a Dachshund, with crooked forelegs at the knees and with much more bone and longer heads than on Beagles. They were not the dark tan colour of Dachshunds but the colour of Foxhounds with a certain amount of white about them.'

Lord Galway wasn't alone in developing the English Basset hound; Lord Onslow also started to breed from Le Coulteux hounds, and in 1874, Mr Everett Millais, son of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood painter, imported Model, and showed him at the Wolverhampton Dog Show in 1875 to great public interest. George Krehl imported Fino de Paris, another influential French sire at the basis of many pedigrees. Galway's outcrossing with beagles and Millais' outcrossing with bloodhounds began to form the distinctive heavy-boned, wrinkled outline of the British Basset hound.

The newly formed Kennel Club recognised the breed in 1880 and in 1884, the Basset Hound Club was formed, with such influential supporters as Queen Alexandra, herself a keen breeder of Bassets, rough and smooth varieties, and clumber spaniels.

Although these hounds were bred predominantly as show dogs or good-natured companions, hunting packs of Bassets were formed around this time,

and the breed grew in popularity until limited quality breeding stock and the advent of World War I led to numbers dropping drastically, and the Basset Hound Club folding in 1921. A minor renaissance, led by several formidable lady kennel-owners, took place in the 30s, only to be halted again by World War II, but thanks to the efforts of Peggy Keevil, Nina Elms and Edith Grew, the Basset was kept going with fresh French blood.

In 1954 the Basset Hound Club was reformed, and in the decades to come, the breed would enjoy a burst of popularity, peaking in the Hush Puppy years of the 1960s and 70s. Today's Fred Basset might seem a long way from St Hubert's relentless tracking dogs but it  
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takes a small piece of cheese left somewhere in the kitchen for that medieval hunting instinct to re-emerge...

