

COUNTRY LIFE®

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EVERY WEEK

The gentleman's terrier



Snowdrops worth their weight in gold
Church flowers: tread softly through the minefield



Irish terriers, photographed by Andrew Farrar



Church flowers

'There's nothing worse than a giant vase toppling over just as the bride says "I do"'

Cautionary tales, page 54

Sailing

'We had become unlikely experts in teak decking, SSB radio, diesel engines and more'

An Atlantic adventure, page 66

White Russians

'I always took my Russian heritage for granted'

Guardians of the imperial legacy, page 48



Istockphoto; Richard Cannon; Andrew Farrar

The irrepressible Irish terrier's *joie de vivre* won it scores of admirers in its Victorian heyday, and the breed's devoted following is determined to secure its future (page 38)

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'I sometimes think he's the son I never had'

The charming Irish terrier, devoted friend to soldiers and princes alike, is in danger of dying out, but its followers are determined to turn things around. James Jackson reports

Photographs by Andrew Farrar

THE Animal War Memorial on London's Park Lane is an extraordinary space. A frieze carved into the curved wall depicts every type of animal that served with the British Armed Forces—cats, camels, elephants and buffalo, to name but a few—and there, tucked under a goat's beard, is the head of an Irish terrier. Ears typically cocked, he's alert, quizzical and resolutely facing forward. He represents the 'Micks', canine heroes of the First World War.

Col Edwin Richardson, a 20th-century expert on military dogs and founder of the British War Dog School (now the Animal Defence Centre in Melton Mowbray) for the First World War, greatly admired the breed, which is described in old Irish manuscripts as 'the poor man's sentinel, the farmer's friend and the gentleman's favourite'.

Irish terriers are, arguably, too convivial for purpose, but their playfulness makes them wonderful companions,

He praised the dogs' intelligence and ability to learn, their sunny temperament and irrepressible high spirits, their ability to last for hours on a meagre bowl of biscuits and, above all, their extraordinary loyalty to their handlers and their unflinching courage even unto death. 'They are the hardest of dogs, swift yet strong, steady as guard and sentry patrol dogs, unsurpassed as ratters,' he wrote. 'However, they are not reliable as messengers. They are too easily diverted by the need to greet friends, old, new or imagined.' He had a point: Irish terriers are, arguably, too convivial for purpose, but their natural playfulness makes them wonderful companions. Certainly, they lifted morale in the trenches of the First World Warlike nothing else.

Sadly, this delightful terrier is in decline, something adoring owners find hard to believe. In 2011, only 277 puppies were >



Above Irish terriers make the perfect playmates, as Ruby (shown here with Ollie and Freddie Bennett) proves. Facing page The Wilmot-Sitwells' dogs, Millie and Maddie

A distinguished ancestry

The Irish terrier is thought to originate from Co Cork, where it was bred as a hunting dog, probably incorporating strains of other black-and-tan terriers in the British Isles, such as the Kerry Blue, Wheaten, Glen of Imaal and Lakeland

The dog's heyday was the Victorian era—the first breed class was in 1873, in Dublin, and the first breed club was formed in 1879, when the standard was drawn up. They were fashionable, neat dogs with coats that didn't shed, and were billed as the perfect all-rounder, 'a proper dog that stands to the knee'

Also known as the Daredevil Irish red terrier, it was a favourite everywhere from the royal palaces of Europe—the Hapsburgs used them as shooting dogs—to the caravans of Irish gypsies. The maharajahs of British India favoured them—a painting of one still hangs in Delhi's Government House

The Irish Terrier Association (01733 205386; www.irishterrierassociation.co.uk) was formed in 1911; its first president was the Marquis of Breadalbane

In 1923, Kennel Club registrations reached an all-time high of 1,148

In 1933, Gordon Selfridge staged an exhibition (opened by another admirer, the Duke of Atholl) in the dogs' honour on an entire floor of his London store

The breeder most responsible for promoting the Irish terrier is probably William 'Billy' Graham (right) of Belfast, who once said: 'The only reason they were not itemised on Noah's Ark was because it was quite unnecessary to take them on board. They could swim alongside so well'







'They spend more time upside-down in a hedgerow than retrieving': Lord and Lady Manners with one of their Irish terriers

registered with the Kennel Club, which placed the Irish terrier on its list of vulnerable native breeds. For me, they were the best friends a child could have. I was brought up with them—my mother, Lucy Jackson, who is president of the Irish Terrier Association, loves them so much she's written seven books on the subject, has a website dedicated to them (www.weloveirishterriers.com) and wrote a poem, which begins 'How do I love you/My little brown dog'.

My earliest childhood memories are of the rough and tumble, the chewed toys, the attempts to play 'quiet' games with an Irish terrier encroaching on the Snakes and Ladders board and the comfort they provided during bouts of mumps and measles. They were more like siblings than dogs, and so much a part of everything we did. We seemed to belong to the same chaotic gang and simply tumbled around together.

Viscount Coke, owner of Holkham Hall, has similarly happy memories. 'I can still remember the ecstatic welcome from my mother's Irish terriers whenever I came home from boarding school,' he recalls. 'My wife, Polly, gave me my own Irish, Hector, when we came to live at Holkham. He was a real character, loved the children and pretty much ran the place. Our present dog, Jupiter, belongs to my daughter Juno and is a wonderful family man, very loving and keeps us all in order. I love the breed: they're feisty, full of themselves

and there's never a dull moment.'

Fiona Wilmot-Sitwell, a director at the Lennox & Wyfold charitable foundation, is another devotee, and owns Millie and Maddie. 'We're keen gardeners and, in spite of their reputation as diggers, I taught them very early on not to dig holes in the lawns. They're wonderful, funny, charming companions and adore our three sons,' she comments, adding on behalf of all owners: 'Once you've had one, you'll never want to be without.'

The sporting Irish

For Lord Manners, a lawyer, Irish terriers are a new experience. 'We've always had dogs, but mainly working dogs, and our three Irish terriers have been very different. They follow the guns, but spend more time upside-down in a hedgerow than performing neat retrieving. They're great enthusiasts and wonderful companions, and, even at their most exasperating, are so funny that one has to laugh.'



Viscount Coke at home at Holkham with daughter Juno and Jupiter, the Irish terrier



Above Olivia, Georgia and Imogen Jackson with Zuli, Beegie and Tess. *Below* Sir Derek Jacobi with leading lady Bella



The stage Irish

Actor Sir Derek Jacobi's 'adored' Bella, who appeared with him in the film *A Bunch of Amateurs*, makes the perfect backstage dog, welcoming visitors to his dressing room and once adorning Lawrence Olivier's chaise longue. 'It takes the heat off me,' he admits. 'She's so beguiling.' He recounts an alarming incident: 'We had one terrifying adventure with her when she fell into a river in full spate. It was freezing cold but she hung onto a ledge with her front paws, up to her neck in the icy water. It was a miracle we found her in time. She recovered quickly and it was then that I realised how precious she is to me.'

The former soldier's Irish

Ram Seeger, former commander of Britain's Special Boat Service, never had time to own a dog during his soldiering life, but he now has James and says it's been a wonderful experience. 'I love the combination of tough, energetic hunter and gentle house dog, who carries his bed around and makes it up around the house. He even accepts that the cats were here first. It's touching to see his devotion to the grandchildren—he sits "on guard" beside the pram. We take him everywhere—he's a great traveller. I sometimes think he's the son I never had.'